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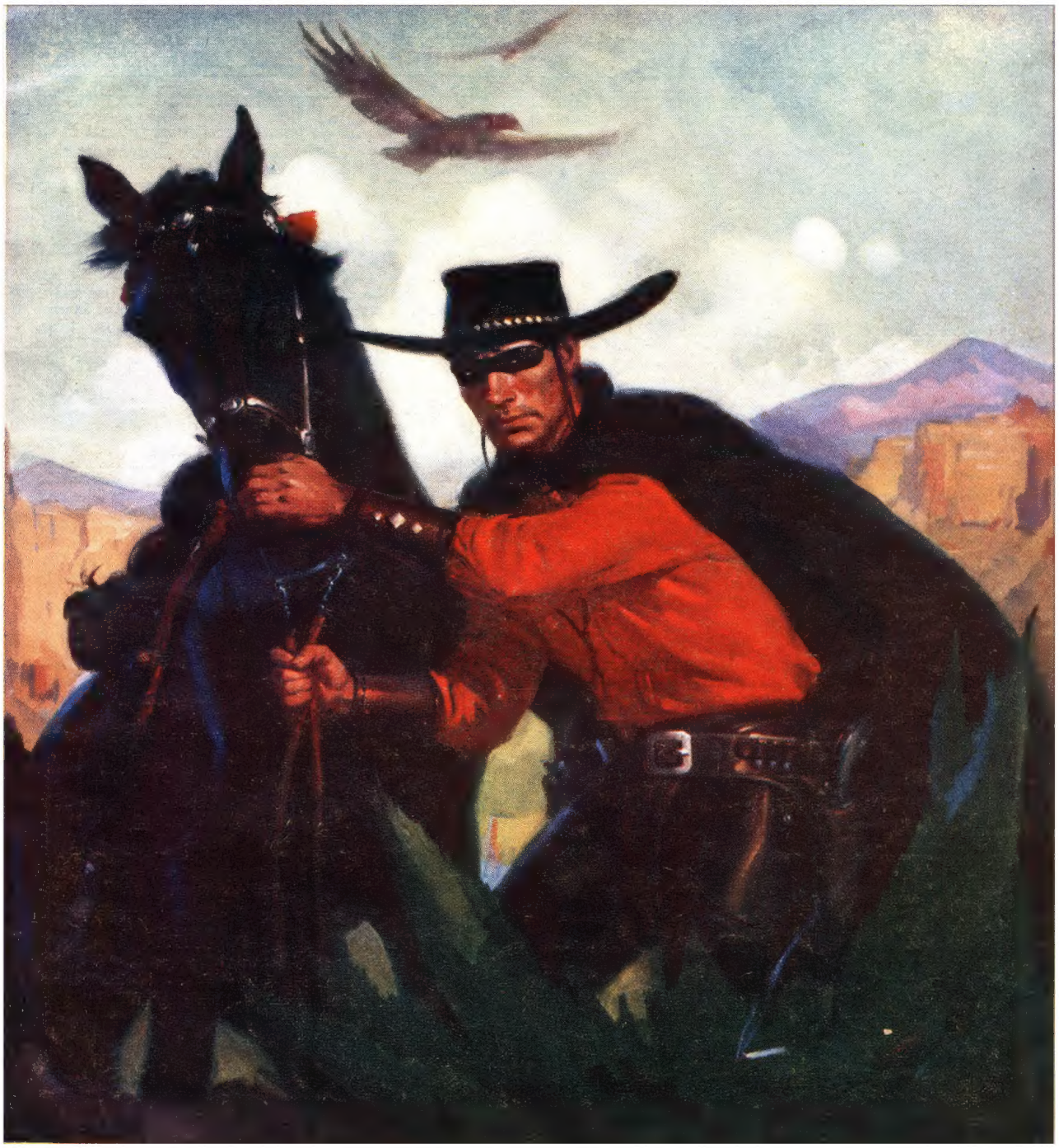
A THRILLING
PUBLICATION



FEATURING:

DEADLINE FOR SHEEP

A FULL LENGTH WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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Now! Medical scalp and hair specialist's KEMPOR formula actually can regrow new hair by carrying fresh, vital nourishment deep into starved hair roots!

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(NOTE: Since these cases were taken from the Doctor's private files, actual names have not been used, and pictures of professional models have been substituted to assure privacy to actual patients described.)

CASE 645 Physician, 45
Symptoms: Dry, irritated scalp. Excessive hair loss.
Result: "Excessive hair loss ceased entirely. *New hair growth replaced those which were formerly lost.*"

CASE 847 Housewife, 42
Symptoms: Considerable loss of hair *following permanent.* Hair came out in handfuls.
Result: *Hair loss ceased. A complete regrowth of hair occurred later!*

CASE 1206 Druggist, 26
Symptoms: *"Hereditary" premature baldness. Father largely bald at 25 years of age.*
Result: Scalp and hair clean. *No further unnatural hair loss since start of treatment.*

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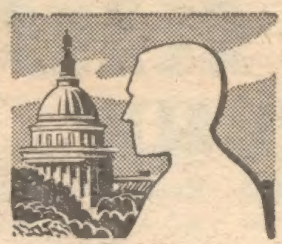

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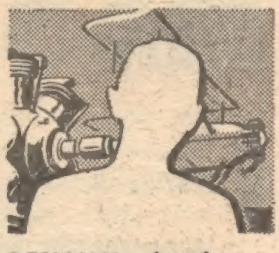
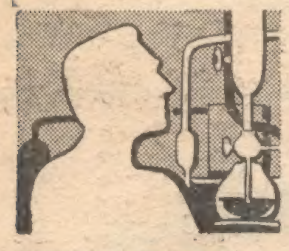
INVENTOR of a well-known U. S. Army rifle.

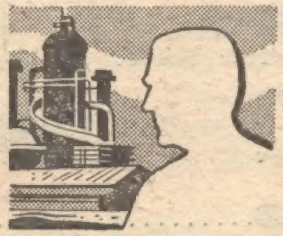


DESIGNER of a famous aircraft engine.



CHEMICAL director of nationally known research laboratory.

ENGINEER in charge of a famous company's engineering laboratory.



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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

Vol. XXX, No. 3 DECEMBER, 1951 A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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DAVID X. MANNERS
Editor

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A department of true tales concerning the courageous men who found excitement, adventure, and sometimes death in the quest for gold

Conducted by JOHN A. THOMPSON

MADAM VARNISH dealt faro, handled the wheel and played professional poker in the Little Casino at White Oaks. She earned her nickname because she was "slick as varnish" with a deck of cards. Billy the Kid often rode into White Oaks, at times to shoot up Main Street and watch the citizens run for cover. At other times Billy rode in on business, with prime beef to sell to the mining town's butchers—provided they asked no questions concerning who originally owned the T-bones on the hoof.

Neither of these characters would ever have given White Oaks a thought; in fact, the multi-million dollar bonanza gold camp in Lincoln county, New Mexico, might never have existed at all—if it hadn't been for a man who said his name was Wilson.

Not Jack, Jim, or Tom Wilson. Just Wilson. Except for a pair of cold blue eyes that never softened, there was little to distinguish Wilson from thousands of others who followed the Rainbow Trail in the early days of the West. Except that for reasons of his own—reasons that must have been compelling—Wilson traded the golden fortune he found at White Oaks for a few silver dollars, a gun, some grub and a three buck burro.

Was He Loco?

Crazy? Historians doubt it. His story from the beginning seems to indicate that it's more likely he was an outlaw on the dodge—an owlhooter who took to prospecting in the lonely hills around White Oaks as a hideout from the law.

Thanks to the gold that Wilson found, White Oaks grew from the tent camp of a single group of prospectors to a city of thousands, its main street lined with brick buildings and fine hotels, its side streets a medley of blaring honkytonks. There was even a newspaper optimistically called, *The Golden Era* that had as a reporter the later, famous western writer, Emerson Hough.

Wilson came into the picture about 1880. That spring a group of placer miners had an isolated camp at White Oaks springs, working a paystreak of placer gold in a rocky gulch at the foot of Baxter Mountain. Normally the gulch was dry. This necessitated hauling water in barrels filled at the springs down to the gulch.

One evening, a stranger trudged into their camp. He was ragged, bear-dirty and all in from pushing himself across the desert—afoot.

The stranger asked for supper and a place to stay overnight. In spite of the man's unprepossessing appearance camp hospitality accorded him his wish.

Outlaw Habits

The stranger seemed nervous, glancing continuously down his back trail during the meal which he ate like a starved man.

In the morning the guest with the steel hard eyes hung around camp long after breakfast, apparently hesitant about his next move. Silently he watched the men fill their water barrels and load them on the burros.

"Placering?" he said finally. "Used to be a prospector myself—once. How about a fellow stickin' long enough to make himself a stake? Don't aim to stay long."

The miners looked at one another.

"It's a free country, mister. Stick around if you want."

The invitation wasn't overly friendly, but the stranger accepted it.

"Thanks. The name's Wilson."

The group at White Oaks springs never knew him by any other name. Nor did they

deem it healthy to ask questions.

Whatever his intentions originally, Wilson stayed on—through the summer and into fall. And it was evident that whatever else he was or had been, Wilson was a good prospector.

The rocker he built was the best in camp. He showed his companions how to fix their homemade gold-savers and improve their efficiency by putting more riffles in the bottom.

As autumn wore on the gulch gold began to thin out. Some of the miners got itchy feet and moved on. Wilson stayed. So did three others, Jack Winters, Harry Baxter, and another man named Wilson—John E. Wilson. This second Wilson was later instrumental in building up White Oaks to its one-time position as one of New Mexico's great gold mining towns.

Day of Discovery

One day the four went down to the gulch for their day's placering. They knocked off at noon and the No-Name Wilson moved off a piece to eat his lunch alone, as was his custom.

Climbing a flat-sided rock Wilson spread his meal out beside him. Something sharp pricked his finger. He looked down quickly then jumped from the rock with a yell.

The others down the gulch heard him.

"Rattler?" called out Winters.

"Rattler, my eye! It's gold. Wire gold sticking out of this damn boulder. Bring a pick."

Hurriedly the miners gathered around the big rock, chipping off pieces of picture ore, hand-size chunks of quartz with thin streamers of pure gold running through, even sticking out in places like strands of yellow wire. A few hours hunt disclosed the vein from which the rock had come.

"You found the break-off," said Winters addressing Wilson. "You get first whack at staking out a discovery claim. We'll stake our own claims alongside of it."

Wilson shook his head. "Got no use for all that gold. Nor cities either. Tell you what. I'll trade my share for some grub and one of the burros. Gotta be movin' anyhow."

In the end, Wilson took the grub, a burro, a gun, a handful of extra cartridges, and nine silver dollars—all the cash the others had—for his share in the discovery. Then he headed up the trail, never to be heard of, or from, again.

The first claim staked—by John E. Wilson—was called the Old Abe. In its day it produced more than three million dollars worth of gold—and started White Oaks as a bonanza gold town.

Close to the Abe, Jack Winters and Harry Baxter staked the North and South Homestake mines, and sold them for $300,000 each a few months later.

Are YOU In This Picture ?

So many people think it is their fate to struggle through life, barely making ends meet, and having discontent and turmoil surround their every effort. You are possibly one of these.

But right here and now we want to say to you that THESE CONDITIONS ARE NOT PART OF YOUR NATURAL HERITAGE! Do you think that SUCCESS, PEACE, and MATERIAL ABUNDANCE are only for the other fellow—not you? Don't you think you have the opportunity to CHOOSE WHICH PATH WILL LEAD YOU TO OVERCOMING VICTORY?

If you think for one minute that you are doomed to disappointment the rest of your life, GET RID OF THESE THOUGHTS, FOR SUCH NEED NOT BE THE CASE! For if you mean business, and are willing to accept that which you should have, we have a wonderful message for you!

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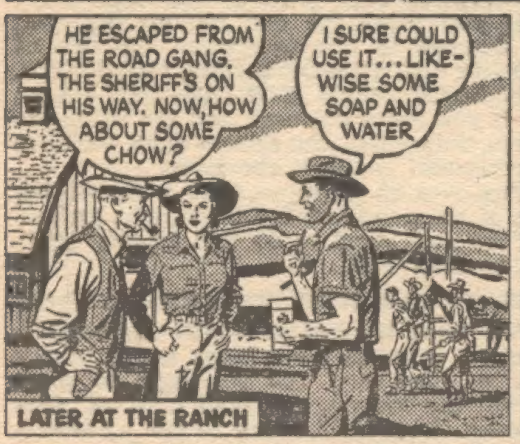
CHUCK HEARD A SCREAM AND THEN...

HOPELESSLY LOST IN THE RUGGED CANYON COUNTRY, DIANE BLAIR WISHES SHE'D TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY THE "DUDE RANCH" RULES AGAINST RIDING ALONE... AND THEN...

ECHOING UP A NEARBY DRAW, HER CRY REACHES A YOUNG GEOLOGIST


HE ESCAPED FROM THE ROAD GANG. THE SHERIFF'S ON HIS WAY. NOW, HOW ABOUT SOME CHOW?
I SURE COULD USE IT... LIKE-WISE SOME SOAP AND WATER
LATER AT THE RANCH

WHEN IT COMES TO SHAVING QUICKLY AND EASILY AT A SAVING, YOU CAN'T BEAT THIN GILLETTES. THEY FAR OUTSELL ALL OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADES BECAUSE THEY'RE KEENER AND LAST LONGER. THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY, SO THEY NEVER NICK OR SCRAPE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
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TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

Lasso Larrups

by Harold Helfer

DANIEL BOONE, perhaps the greatest of all the scouts, died penniless in Defiance, Missouri.

DELIVERY OF LETTERS from Monero, N. M., to Lumberton, only six miles away, takes a full day—longer than it did in Pony Express days. The mail now goes from Monero by bus to Chama, across the Colorado state line to Pagosa Springs, where it remains overnight. The next day it goes back into New Mexico to Lumberton.

ABOUT FIVE HUNDRED RODEOS are held each year in the United States.

AFTER THREE WEEKS of hard riding and fighting without injury while making a new Western movie, actor Bruce Cabot tripped over an exposed root in his backyard and broke his right hand.

ACQUIRED by exploration and settlement, the Oregon Territory was the only American possession gained without warfare or purchase.

DO YOU HAVE AN ELK about whose age you're curious? Well, the Montana State College, at Bozeman, announced that if you'll bring the elk, or one of its teeth, over to the school it will be glad to tell you how old the animal is.

ACTRESS VIRGINIA MAYO has had a song dedicated to her by one of her Arizona ranch hands. It's entitled, "My Boss's A Beauty."

THE STORY IS TOLD that some years ago, when justice was still on the rudimentary side, there was a two-fisted judge in Arizona who ruled his court with an iron hand and a pair of sixshooters. The only book in the whole town was an early Sears Roebuck catalogue. The judge kept it on his desk and whenever it was time to evoke a sentence, he would consult its pages. One day he opened the book at random, glanced at a page, then announced to the prisoner, "I fine you $4.98." The prisoner started to protest. "Shut up," whispered his lawyer. "Supposing he'd turned to 'pianos' instead of 'ladies dresses'?"

ABOUT 50,000,000 ACRES in the western part of the United States are highly fertile but cannot produce crops because of lack of water.

BUFFALO BILL used to tell this story about an Englishman visiting the West. While riding through a canyon one day, a terrific gust of wind came along and swept the Britisher off the wagon seat. After he'd picked himself up and brushed the sand and gravel off, he complained: "I say! You people do overdo ventilation in this country."

ROBERT WISE, Hollywood director, was having one heck of a time shooting some scenes for a new Western movie near Santa Fe. A persistent dust storm had the film personnel practically up to their knees in sand. Finally, Miguel Martinez, governor of the Tewa Indian tribe said, "Will help you out. Will bring rain." Puzzled, Director Wise asked how he could bring rain. Martinez said, "You see." He called together his tribe of five hundred and they prayed for rain. Sure enough, the next day the rains came.

AN AMARILLO, TEX., man is developing a special breed of cattle particularly suited to the Panhandle country. The new breed is a cross of Brahma and Aberdeen-Angus.

A WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

BY WALKER A. TOMPKINS

DEADLINE

Pursued by a posse of bounty hunters, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk are driven into the cross fire of a feud

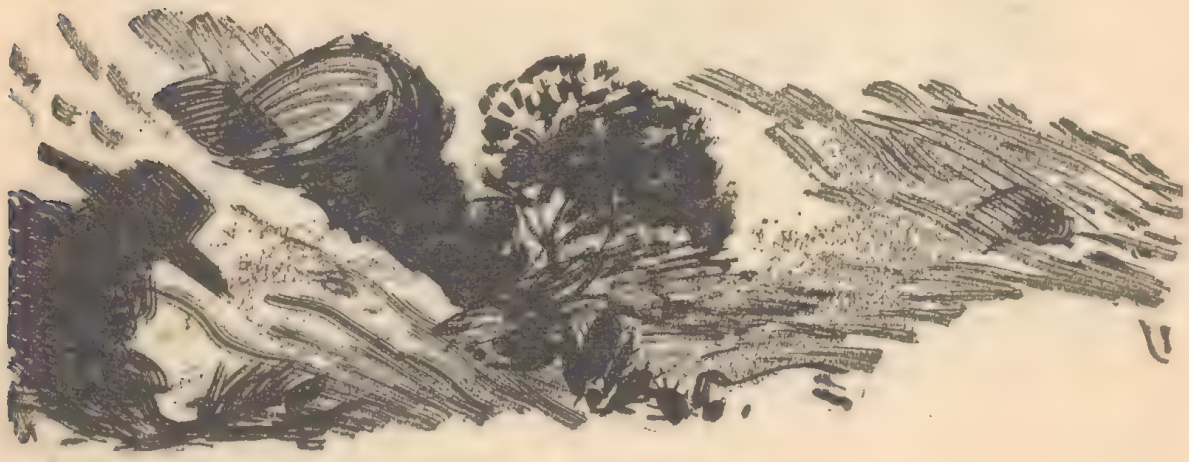
CHAPTER I

Canyon Catastrophe

FROM their hidden camp in the gun-sight notch atop Piñon Peak, Wayne Morgan, wandering cowboy, and his Yaqui Indian saddle partner watched the wood-burning, funnel-stacked locomotive laboring up the grade far below. Twenty-odd loaded stock cars and a caboose made a heavy drag for a lone engine, on tracks as steeply pitched as the Border & Southwestern spur. This spur, crossing the Alligash badlands, linked the Owlhorn Mesa cattle country with the rest of Arizona Territory.

The laboring of the engine's exhaust carried distinctly through the rarefied air to the ears of the two fugitives from the law, who were just now taking a much-needed rest on Piñon Peak. The train was leaving the rimrock of Rosario Canyon, unable to "make a run" for the Piñon Peak grade because of the tight hairpin curve which engineers and grading gangs had dubbed the Hook.

What interested the two men about this train was the freight it was hauling. Morgan's field-glasses revealed that each



FOR SHEEP

slat-sided stock car was loaded to capacity with sheep—thick-fleeced Merinos. Tacked to the door of each carload of sheep was a railroad placard reading:

DESTINATION: WARBONNET, ARIZ. TERR.

On their way up to the Peak the day before Morgan and the Indian had encountered a large, weather-beaten sign nailed to a post alongside the railroad tracks where a survey marker indicated the west boundary of Owlhorn County:

WARNING! DEADLINE FOR SHEEP!
OWLHORN COUNTY GRAZE STRICTLY
RESERVED FOR CATTLE AND HORSES
Warbonnet Cowmen's Association
Kent Sebastian, President

"Makin's of a full-scale range war in that train load of woolies, Hawk," Wayne Morgan commented now. "Can't blame the Mesa ranchers for not wantin' their graze sheeped out, though. Some herder with more nerve than common sense must be waitin' at Warbonnet to take delivery on them Merinos."

The Indian yawned. "We will have trouble enough of our own dodging the law on our way across Owlhorn Mesa, Señor," he drawled wearily, "without worrying about what happens when this train reaches Warbonnet."

Morgan grinned at Blue Hawk. The Yaqui had been on guard duty since midnight, and it was now high noon. Hawk had allowed his companion four hours' extra sleep, knowing how worn out Morgan was.

"Hit your soogans, Hawk," Morgan urged. "I won't rouse you unless I spot that Flagstaff sheriff's posse gettin' too close to our camp."

Blue Hawk needed no urging to head for his bedroll, down in the cleft between the split rocks. Their four horses also were on picket there.

The same primitive instincts which would have guided a scarred old desert wolf in the selection of his den had brought these two riders to the rocky summit of Piñon Peak. It was a safe hideout, although the nearest water supply was three miles away, in the pit of Rosario Canyon. And that was so remote that the roar of the San Ysidro River's brawling rapids was lost to their ears.

REGRETFULLY the posse-hounded riders had passed up the thick buffalo grass below aspen level, forcing their mounts to subsist on the sparse foliage which grew in the sheltered gunsight notch. Scanty grass, seeded by passing birds and vagrant winds.

By all usual standards, the camp seemed ill-chosen. It was subject to the beating punishment of the sun by day, chilled by high-country gales at night. Platinum frost had rimed the rocks roundabout after the dew settled last night, turning them to ghostly white shapes in the spectral light of the stars.

Only dire necessity could have driven men to such a place. Any man not in the know would have condemned Morgan and the Indian for tenderfoot tactics. They would have been considered ignorant of the most elementary tricks known to experienced mountaineers in their passage through such a raw and untamed country as the dreaded Alligash badlands.

But for their purposes, Piñon Peak was ideal. A twenty-man posse headed by Flagstaff's two-gun sheriff, Zeke Paulson, was somewhere on their back trail. This peak commanded a panoramic view of the surrounding malpais. No posse could get within five miles of this lookout post without being seen.

They had sufficient food and water to last them on the overnight journey across the Owlhorn Mesa cattle land. They would head out on that journey at sunset, on their way to the sanctuary of the Mexican border until the hue and cry died down.

Sheepmen and Cattlemen Battle for Supremacy!

For Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk carried rewards on their scalps, payable dead or alive, running well into four figures. Bounty which turned the hand of every man against them.

Wayne Morgan made a striking figure, hunkered down on a slab of rock, maintaining a ceaseless vigil of the surrounding country with his ten-power Army field-glasses. The ordinary tensions which bedeviled a man on the dodge did not surface in him. He appeared completely relaxed in mind and sinew, ignoring the risks of his daily life as might a wild animal.

He wore the cactus-scuffed batwing chaps, hickory shirt, and cleft-crowned Stetson of an ordinary cowhand. The twin cedar-butted Peacemaker .45s holstered at his thighs were commonplace to the times and to the country. His spurred Coffeyville boots were the footgear of any drifting saddle bum. No shiny metal ornaments which might have shed a spark of sunlight and drawn the eye of some hostile man-hunter miles away adorned them.

WAYNE MORGAN

In his early thirties, Morgan was at the peak of his physical powers. Long training in trouble of many kinds in which his altruism had compelled him to take a hand, had resulted in his acquiring an animal's ability to relax his nerves and body whenever opportunity offered.

Paradoxically, however, the description of this man and his name, were unknown to reward hunters. They had never appeared on any mass-circulated law dodger. For Wayne Morgan lived a dual rôle on the Western frontier. He was the alter ego of the far-famed Masked Rider, known to a host of well-wishers as the Robin Hood of the West.

It was that masked avenger of wrongs who was the object of a man-hunt from

the Pecos to the Pacific, and from Canada to the Rio Grande. For time and again evil men had committed ruthless crimes which they had foisted on the Masked Rider, who could never prove his innocence, though actually his whole life was devoted to righting wrongs; to the defense of the underdog wherever there might be trouble.

So life for the masked avenger all too often was one of narrow escapes, since all through the land so many bounty hunters were only too ready to "shoot first and ask questions afterward."

It would have been difficult to believe, though, that Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider were one and the same man. In all essentials they were apparently so different. In his black garb and atop his tall black stallion, the masked man appeared bigger, even taller than Morgan. When he spoke it was in a deep bass voice, in gruff, but cultured accents, for he was an educated man.

In his Wayne Morgan rôle he was the happy-go-lucky wandering cowboy with the itching foot, ever seeking greener lands beyond the next hill. He spoke in a pleasant baritone voice, in the soft drawl native to the range he loved.

NOW Morgan's keen, vigilant blue eyes swept the north and west, covering myriad canyons and ridges of the Alligash badlands. They moved on to scan Owlhorn Mesa, stretching endlessly to eastward to meet a hazy, edgeless horizon. Then, impelled by idle curiosity, they returned to the toiling freight train chuffing up the grade at the foot of Piñon Peak below.

The red-painted cars were crawling slowly, like a vast serpent, over the fills and cuts of the roadbed which engineers had blasted from the living rock. Another quarter-mile and the train would reach the top of the grade, with level going across the brasada-mottled flats toward the railhead at Warbonnet town.

The engine was approaching the "Deadline for Sheep" sign at the county border now. Swinging his binoculars in that direction, Morgan suddenly tensed, drawing a sharp breath between his teeth.

Six riders, masked with red bandannas and wearing oilskin slickers to conceal their clothing, were drawn up alongside the railroad track in the shadow of the Warbonnet Cowmen's Association warning sign.

No ordinary hold-up could be in the making, Morgan knew. Bandits were well aware that freight trains carried no baggage or mail cars. Yet this sextette of horsemen were lying in wait for the approaching train; of that he was positive. Else why should they be masked?

Morgan saw blinding shafts of sunlight spear off naked gun metal as the riders hauled Winchester carbines from saddleboots. Watching helplessly, the fugitive saw men lift those rifles to cover the engine crew as the cowcatcher of the laboring locomotive drew alongside the county border monument.

The snorting exhaust of the engine ceased abruptly. To Morgan's ears came the grinding metallic screech of brakes locking on drive wheels, as the hoghead brought his slow-moving sheep train to a halt.

Morgan felt his heart slugging his ribs, the tom-tom throb of his pulse beating rapidly in his ears. There was no shooting, but one of the riders, mounted on a strawberry roan pony, swung from stirrups. He ducked across the cinder-carpeted apron of the right-of-way, vanishing between the engine tender and the first sheep-laden stock car.

Sheer horror laid its cutting edge on Morgan as he saw the train of stock cars start rolling backwards down the grade. The slicker-clad outlaw had disengaged the couplers which hooked it to the engine!

Gravity made the runaway train pick up speed. Like a man in a nightmare, wanting to scream a warning to the men trapped in the caboose but unable to make a sound, even though it was impossible for him to be heard, Morgan watched. The string of stock cars rumbled at ever-increasing speed down the snakelike

curves of track.

At the bottom of the grade, there on the blue-gulfed abyss which was Rosario Canyon, the tracks made their tight horseshoe curve, the deadly Hook. This train, rocketing backward down the Piñon Peak tracks, would have reached a mile-a-minute clip by the time it reached the Hook.

Even if they had time to run along the car tops and set brake wheels, the brakemen in the caboose could not slow down the tobogganing sheep train in time to prevent a derailment when the doomed freight hit the Hook.

The ear-riving screech of flanged wheels rounding the compound curves of the grade was an actual pain in Morgan's ears. The train was a red blur now, alternately appearing and disappearing among the rocks and brush of the ridges which corrugated the Peak like roots radiating from a stump.

MORGAN forced himself to pull his eyes away from the doomed runaway cars, to put his glasses on the halted locomotive at the Owlhorn County line. Smoke was boiling from its pot-bellied stack. The six slicker-clad riders who had perpetrated this impending tragedy had disappeared. There was no trace of them now except clouds of alkali dust boiling up from the chaparral beyond the roadbed. That told that the riders were making a getaway toward the trackless Alligash badlands.

Morgan saw no sign of life around the engine cab. Perhaps both engineer and firemen had been shot down!

Nausea stabbed Morgan's vitals as he swung his binoculars in a swift arc to overtake the runaway sheep train. He was in time to see the cupolaed caboose on the end of the rocking string of stock cars flash into view at the base of the peak. At incredible speed it was heading toward the entering curve of the hairpin Hook.

The terrific inertia of the free-wheeling stock cars was too great for the caboose trucks to manage. As Morgan stared, he saw the caboose leave the rails of the Hook, hurtling like a thrown matchbox over the rocky brink of the San Ysidro River gorge.

Behind the caboose which was carrying its human freight to certain death at the bottom of the two-hundred-feet abyss, the carloads of sheep toppled off the spread rails of the Hook so rapidly they were a confused blur in Morgan's glasses.

Like cigar boxes tied together with string, the Warbonnet-bound freight train cars went chuting end-over-end in a long, whiplike line. They vanished from view into the ghastly depths of the Rosario gorge.

Then the last stock car was gone, and a deathly silence took command. In the space of fifty clock-ticks, an entire train had been totally obliterated, swept into limbo!

CHAPTER II

Mercy Mission

WAYNE MORGAN'S involuntary cry of horror roused Blue Hawk from his catlike sleep. The Indian leaped up and over to the parapet of lava rock where his partner crouched. Morgan's voice carried overtones of more horror as he pointed out the stalled locomotive down below, and told what he had seen.

"I'd think I'd had a nightmare, dreamed the whole business, Hawk," Morgan panted, "if that engine wasn't there to prove what I say. A whole train gone in the twinkling of an eye!"

The Yaqui's inscrutable face revealed nothing. He had been the inseparable companion of Wayne Morgan, the Masked Rider, through years of rangeland adventure and peril, and between them in such moments as this there was no need for words. They understood each other.

For Blue Hawk alone, of all the men in the world, knew the Robin Hood outlaw's secret—and even he, who would gladly

have given his life for his friend, did not know the Masked Rider's real name, or anything of his background. The only name he ever used for either Wayne Morgan or the Masked Rider was "Senor."

Educated in a mission school, Blue Hawk was far removed from the usual redskin found in the Southwest. The single eagle feather thrust in his raven-black hair revealed his status as sub-chief of his noble tribe. He wore a linsey-woolsey shirt and white drill pants. The only red man's garb to which he had consistently adhered was a beaded bandeau to hold back his straight black hair, and buckskin moccasins laced half-way up his copper-hued shins.

Also, although he was adept in the use of rifle and six-gun, Blue Hawk always carried a yew-wood hunting bow and a quiver of flint-tipped arrows. Those primitive weapons had come in handy on more than one occasion to drop a stalking enemy, or to bag a deer or antelope when a gunshot would have brought cruising posse riders to their camp in a hostile country. Blue Hawk's favorite weapon, however, which he habitually carried, was a razor-whetted bowie knife in a sheaf at his belt. His rifle was carried in his saddle-boot.

"If there were men riding that caboose," the Indian commented gravely, after he had heard Morgan through, "perhaps they lie badly hurt at the bottom of the canyou. It may be days before another iron horse comes, so—"

Morgan swabbed his weather-browned cheeks with his neck scarf. He shared the Yaqui's thought. It was their duty to get to the scene of the train wreck in Rosario Canyon as quickly as possible, in case anyone had survived that calamitous drop.

"It is a risk," Blue Hawk conceded. "If the Flagstaff sheriff has tracked us as far as this mountain—"

Wayne Morgan cased his field-glasses and scrambled down to the camp. Like his *compañero,* he knew the peril of leaving this sanctuary in daylight at the present time. On the other hand, if maimed and dying men were trapped in the wrecked caboose at the gorge bottom, no man with humanitarian instincts could refuse to aid them.

"I can make it down and back by dark, Hawk," Morgan said, picking up his Visalia stock saddle and split-ear halter. "You can wait here. If you spot the posse, pull out with Midnight. I can overtake you later. You are the one who is really in danger from the man-hunters, for after that last narrow escape of ours you are *known* to be the companion of the Masked Rider. Wayne Morgan, alone, will hardly be suspected."

Blue Hawk shook his head, though, unconvinced as he followed his partner between the rocks. He unpicketed his gray saddler while Morgan was readying the hammerhead roan which was always his mount in his rôle of wandering cowboy. They would leave behind Midnight, the black stallion the Masked Rider rode, and their pack-horse.

"If you find any hombre living down there, Senor, you will need many hands," the Indian declared sagely. "I go with you."

Wayne Morgan did not argue. He mounted but, as they were leaving camp, he felt a tremor of concern coast down his back. He was not forgetting the black domino mask and the sable-hued cape, the ebony-stocked six-guns and the black sombrero packed in one of Midnight's saddle pouches.

THAT was his garb in his rôle of Masked Rider. It was known, and talked about wherever men gathered at bars or campfires. If some prowling rider with the Flagstaff posse should stumble across this camp during their absence in Rosario Canyon, disaster—maybe death—would be waiting for them upon their return. The Masked Rider's black garb was too well known throughout the West for a man to mistake what it was.

But, characteristically, both Morgan and the Yaqui put their own danger out of their minds as they rode down the sun-parched flank of Piñon Peak. While Mor-

"I'd think it was a nightmare, Hawk, if that engine wasn't there to prove what I say!"

gan doubted that they would find any survivors of the derailed train, he could not rest easy until he had made certain of that grim fact.

The sun was westering toward the remote California peaks by the time they reached the Border & Southwestern tracks. They followed the twisting course down to the hairpin bend where the sheep train had met its doom.

From the rimrock, it was impossible to get a view of the bottom of Rosario Canyon. They were obliged to seek out a cross gulch, and even when they reached it they knew it would not be feasible to make the descent on horseback.

From an *alforja* pouch, Wayne Morgan removed a leather kit stamped with a U.S. Cavalry insignia—a military first-aid pouch, well stocked with sterile gauze, iodine and tourniquets, bandage pads and absorbent cotton. Morgan and Blue Hawk had many times saved each other's lives, patching up their own gunshot wounds, using medical supplies from this kit.

They off-saddled and hobbled the roan and the gray in a clump of aspen alongside the railroad track. Then, realizing the need for haste before darkness set in at the canyon's bottom, they headed down into the fissure in the cliff.

Premature twilight awaited them down

in the dank, shadowy notch of the San Ysidro gorge. The thunder of the river over its rock-toothed bed made a din against which speech was impossible.

Their descent into the two-hundred foot chasm required half an hour of scrambling from rock to rock, bush to bush. When the two men at last broke through the salt cedar hedges to find themselves on a gravel bar lapped by the racing current of the San Ysidro, they were a hundred yards downstream from the train wreckage.

The scene was appalling, even to men who were accustomed to violence and bloodshed. The railroad cars had been crushed to matchwood, as if they had been flimsy boxes stamped under a piledriver. Here and there amid the spray-churning rapids some four-wheeled trucks, bolster rods, or brake shoes could be recognized. Everywhere were the carcasses of mangled sheep. Nowhere did there seem to be a sign of life. By morning the buzzards would be thick in the sky over a fifty-mile stretch of the river.

"The caboose, Señor," Blue Hawk shouted. "It is not here!"

Wayne Morgan caught the Indian's sleeve and pointed. By some queer caprice of fate, the caboose had been hurtled into a deep pothole at the foot of the cascades. Going over the rim first as the train sped backward, its drawbar had broken and momentum had carried it further downstream. Only the roof of the cupola was now visible above the surface of that eddying green-white water.

What brakemen and passengers had been riding that caboose must have been drowned, if indeed, any of them had survived the dizzy, end-over-end drop from the cliff brink high overhead.

"God have mercy on their souls," Morgan whispered reverently.

Blue Hawk muttered something in the Yaqui tongue, his shoulders lifting and falling. Their attempt at rescue had been in vain. But they had the satisfaction of knowing they had done what they could. Not so much as a crippled Merino ram or ewe remained alive here.

On the off-chance that some trainman might have been thrown free of the caboose during its plummeting fall through space, the two men spent a half-hour exploring the roundabout rocks. So far as they could tell, not one of the hundreds of sheep remained alive. They found no dead men.

EAGER to be away from the grim scene, Morgan and Blue Hawk retraced their steps to the side gulch and began their tortuous ascent of the rocky defile.

Full darkness overtook them down in this rocky fissure, although daylight still gleamed in the ribbon of sky visible overhead. They were jaded, fatigued, and their hands were raw and bleeding from fighting their way through barriers of thorny brush and over terraces of fractured rock before they finally gained the level of the rimrock.

Sundown's ruddy glare was in their eyes as they staggered wearily up the slope of the roadbed. And as they turned their eyes in the direction of the aspen clump where they had left their saddle horses, they received the shock of their lives!

The big diamond-stacked locomotive was standing alongside the aspen clump, a plume of steam leaking from its safety dome. Blue-jumpered railroaders stood on either side of the cowcatcher, facing them. The engine was the one which had been coupled to the ill-fated sheep train! A wash of relief went through Morgan. The outlaws had not murdered the engine crew after all!

And then, out of the brush directly alongside them, stepped two men on whose butternut jumpers gleamed shiny, shield-shaped law badges. Each was carrying a sawed-off shotgun. Undoubtedly they had discovered the pinto and roan hobbled behind the aspens.

"Elevate, you two!" snarled the taller of the two lawmen, whipping up his twin-bored Greener to cover Morgan and Blue Hawk. "Reckon you're the pair who own them horses. You're under arrest!"

Morgan and the Yaqui raised their arms. This was an unexpected calamity. They were in no position to argue with star-toters.

"Under arrest?" Morgan echoed. "On what charges?"

The two lawmen crossed the tracks warily, holding their buckshot guns at point-blank range. The engineer and fireman were moving up the crossties from the locomotive at a jog-trot.

"You and your pards derail a whole train, send the conductor and three brakies to their death—and you ask what charges?" the lawman jeered harshly. "If my deputy here and me hadn't been ridin' the engine instead of the caboose, we'd be hashmeat at the bottom of Rosario Canyon, too. Yeah, and if we hadn't been catchin' forty winks in the wood truck back of the engine, them lobo pards of yours wouldn't of jumped us before we could get our guns workin' either.—Hey, you, hoghead! Come here and take their hardware!"

Growling a curse, the locomotive engineer moved around behind Morgan and Blue Hawk and took charge of Morgan's twin six-shooters and the Indian's knife.

"You're crazy!" Morgan said hotly. "We saw that wreck happen—from a hill-top. We went down into the canyon to see if we could save any lives. Why should we want to wreck a train?"

The railroad detective grunted. "I'm dead certain Owlhorn Mesa cattlemen done this job, to keep Rubio Drumheller's sheep from reachin' Warbonnet. That's why the company had me and Sol Weilly here—I'm Trent Overmire—assigned to guard the shipment. And you're a cowman, ain't you?"

Deputy Weilly added sharply, "If you're so innocent, hombre, start explainin' why you were so pat-handy when the wreck happened!"

Morgan hesitated. He could not tell these railroad detectives just where he had been when he had witnessed the actual uncoupling of the sheep train. Once their camp up at the summit was found, it would be known that it was the hideout of the Masked Rider.

"My pardner and I are just driftin' through the country," he finally said in a controlled voice. "This first-aid kit I'm carryin' ought to prove to you we went into the canyon to save lives."

The greasy-overalled engineer ruined what slim chance Morgan might have had to out-talk Overmire.

The hoghead said grimly, "The division super in Flagstaff warned us this mornin' that the Masked Rider and his Injun pard were hightailin' thisaway, Overmire. Do you reckon this pair could be the ones Sheriff Paulson and his posse is trailin'?"

Overmire grounded the butt of his shotgun on a cross-tie and fished a pair of iron manacles from his jumper pocket.

"Maybe you've hit on somethin' at that, Jeff. Leastwise we'll handcuff these hombres so you can take 'em to the sheriff at Warbonnet to hold for investigation. Me and Sol will borrow their horses and do some explorin' hereabouts. Might get a line on the six men in the gang that jumped our train."

But Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk knew that at this moment they might be starting on a journey to the hangman's noose.

CHAPTER III

Sebastian's Promise

HANDCUFFED wrist to wrist, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk climbed into the locomotive cab under the menace of the fireman's gun. Jeff, the engineer, settled himself on his bench, thrust the Johnson bar forward, released his brakes and opened the throttle on its boilerhead quadrant.

As the drive wheels shed sparks on sanded rails, Wayne Morgan stared past the tender to watch Overmire and Weilly lead the horses out of the aspens. Weilly was gesturing off up the slope of Piñon Peak and Morgan knew with a hopeless finality that the detectives had spotted

their trail leading down from camp. If they chose to follow up those hoof prints they could not help but identify Midnight as the famous stallion ridden by the Masked Rider.

Dusk was closing in over Owlhorn Mesa when the locomotive headlight picked up the whitewashed loading pens on the outskirts of Warbonnet. Closing his throttle and touching the air brakes, Jeff brought his six-wheeler to a panting halt alongside the platform of the cowtown's freight and passenger depot.

The usual crowd of loafers was on hand to see the lone engine arrive. Cowhands, for the most part; a blanketed reservation Apache and his obese squaw, and a scattering of boys. As the fireman prodded his prisoners down the iron steps of the cab, Morgan was wondering if the masked men who had wrecked the sheep train were among the gun-hung, spurred and booted waddies gathered on the depot platform.

The freight agent, a manifest clipboard tucked under one arm and a brakeman's hickory switching club in his fist, bellowed a sharp inquiry to Jeff who was leaning out the cab window:

"Where's the rest of your train, Jeff? Rubio Drumheller's fit to be tied, expectin' nineteen carload of sheep!"

The crowd was staring at the handcuffs which linked Morgan and Blue Hawk wrist to wrist, as the engineer called down succintly:

"Five-six masked hombres stopped us at the county line, Adams. Knocked us out before we could put up a fight, unhooked my consist and let 'er roll down the grade to hell. The coyotes are feedin' on Drumheller's mutton down at the bottom of Rosario Canyon by now. Train crew died with 'em."

A shocked silence gripped the crowd on the station platform as the fireman explained how Overmire had arrested the two strangers who had been brought from the scene of the tragedy. A towering bull-chested man wearing a red shirt and Mexican sombrero elbowed through the throng and shook a blocky fist under the station agent's nose.

"What's this I hear about losin' my trainload of Spanish Merinos at the county line, Adams? By grab, I'll sue Border and Southwestern for fifty thousand bucks and make it stick!"

This brown-whiskered ruffian, Wayne Morgan deduced, was sheepman Rubio Drumheller, owner of the slaughtered woolies.

From the background the jeering voice of a half-drunk cowboy lashed at Drumheller: "You didn't think Kent Sebastian's combine would ever let you bring your bleaters onto Mesa graze, did you, Rubio?"

Drumheller spun about to face his tormenter. The big sheepman, momentarily berserk, made a stabbing motion to the six-gun holstered at his thigh. Before he could complete his draw Adams stepped in and calmly slugged Drumheller across the temple with his hickory brake stick. Drumheller fell soddenly against Wayne Morgan's legs, blood welling from his welted scalp.

"Somebody send for the sheriff!" yelled the nervous fireman. "I'm gettin' spooked, ridin' herd on these two train wreckers."

"Here he is—here's Mort Housel now!" Keen relief was in the station agent's voice. "That sheriff of Sebastian's can smell trouble like a beagle hound."

The next moment Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk were confronted by a shifty-eyed man who wore a prodigious walrus mustache, and a ball-pointed silver star on his calfhide vest. In short order the fireman turned his prisoners over to Sheriff Mort Housel's official custody.

HOUSEL paid no attention whatsoever to the sprawled sheepman, Rubio. Obviously Housel, the law in a cattle-raising county, had no sympathy for one in Rubio's profession.

"Here's the key to Overmire's wrist irons," the fireman said, passing a small metal object over to the sheriff. "He says maybe this pair is the Masked Rider and his Injun *compadre* they say is r'arin' around this country. Leastwise, he wants 'em held for questionin', Sheriff."

Ten minutes later the two prisoners were locked in adjoining cells in Warbonnet's squat brick jailhouse.

"If you two helped dump Rubio Drumheller's sheep," Sheriff Housel told them gruffly, "I'll thank you for helpin' nip a range war in the bud, gents. But why in hell didn't you give the boys in the caboose time to jump clear?"

Wayne Morgan sat wearily down on the rawhide-laced cot which was the only furnishing in the low-ceilinged, iron-barred cubicle.

"You've got no reason to jail us, Sheriff," he said heavily. "My Yaqui pard and I didn't have anything to do with that wreck."

Housel's bushy mustache bristled skeptically.

"For your sake," he grunted, "I hope you can prove you ain't the Masked Rider, son. I've had a hangrope ready for that buscadero a plumb long while. And that fireman was right—accordin' to a telegram I got from Flag yesterday. The Masked Rider *was* headin' toward my county, and just a couple of jumps ahead of a posse. See you manana."

The bowlegged sheriff ambled out of the cell block. It was not long, though, before the door opened again, and another man, a stranger to both Morgan and Blue Hawk, strode into the bullpen.

He was a strikingly handsome man, prematurely gray. The tailored fustian town coat, Keevil sombrero, and shop-made boots he wore indicated that he was a person of wealth and affluence.

"I'm Kent Sebastian," he promptly introduced himself, speaking through the bars in a surreptitious whisper. "Crowfant got away all right, did he? How come you two got caught?"

Wayne Morgan's pulses jumped. This Kent Sebastian, he knew from that notice he had seen on the range yesterday, was the kingpin of the Owlhorn Mesa cattle rancher's organization. What he was saying now, while not readily understandable, seemed to indicate a guilty knowledge of who was responsible for wrecking Drumheller's dreams of establishing a sheep ranch in this country.

"It's a long story, Mr. Sebastian," Morgan said evasively. "I—"

Sebastian interrupted sharply, "I'll hear it later. Can't risk the sheriff catching me in here like this. Just wanted to tell you not to worry. I'll see that you get out of here. Crowfant did a good job ditching that sheep train and I won't leave one of his boys in the lurch."

With which mysterious promise Kent Sebastian wheeled and hurried away.

Blue Hawk whispered from the adjoining cell, "This hombre spoke strange words, Senor. He is an outlaw, no?"

Morgan laughed shortly. "Looks like he thinks we're train-wreckers, Hawk. I hope he keeps thinkin' that way—till he gets us out of this *juzgado* anyway."

Exhausted by the strenuous events of the day, both prisoners were soon asleep. It was hours later when they were roused by a rumble of voices in the front office, the voices of two men talking to Sheriff Mort Housel.

Rearing erect on his cot, Wayne Mor-

SHE WALKED ALL THE WAY

WHEN Mrs. Elizabeth Jensen died recently at Butte, Montana, it removed from the Western scene one of its real pioneer women. As a child, Mrs. Jensen, who was 98 at her death, walked from New York to Salt Lake City with a wagon train.

Born in Durham, England, she crossed the plains by ox team in 1862 at the age of eleven. In later years, she liked to talk about how "I walked every foot of the way from New York to Salt Lake City."

—Jack Benton

gan cocked an ear. In the adjoining cell, Blue Hawk was listening intently to the rasping voice of the railroad detective in the outer office, Trent Overmire.

"Sol and me located the Masked Rider's camp up at the top of Piñon Peak just after sundown," Overmire was saying. "Found the Masked Rider's black outfit packed in this saddlebag, and that famous black stallion of his. That hombre I arrested is the Masked Rider, no doubt about it!"

WHAT the sheriff's reaction to that was, or what was his reply, the prisoners did not hear. Because in the office the excited voices dropped to a monotone which was indistinguishable. What seemed plain enough, though, was that Overmire and Weilly apparently had abandoned their intention of scouting the trail of the vanished hold-up gang, and had ridden directly from Piñon Peak to Warbonnet with their more exciting news.

"Senor," Blue Hawk muttered heavily, "this is bad, no?"

Before Morgan could reply, lamplight blazed in the foul-smelling cell-block as Mort House hurried in and unlocked Morgan's cell.

"Come out front, *amigo*," the sheriff ordered, gesturing with a drawn six-gun. "Got somethin' for you to look at." He added ironically, "Sorry to disturb your rest this way."

Morgan flashed a glance at the Yaqui in the next cell. A gloomy prescience was riding him that this might be the last time he would ever see Blue Hawk if these men could in any way connect him with the Masked Rider.

In the front office, blinking his eyes against the glare of the Coleman lamp on the sheriff's desk, Morgan ignored the grinning railroad detectives, who were holding tin cups of coffee poured from the steaming pot on the office stove. His glance swiveled at once to the pair of tooled leather saddle-bags which lay on Housel's desk, empty.

Their contents were spread out amid the papers on the desk. A black domino mask, a neatly folded sable-hued cape, a jet-black Stetson, matched Colt .45s, ebony-stocked, in black-dyed leather holsters—the garb of the Masked Rider, the Robin Hood outlaw whose life for so long had been a crusade in behalf of the downtrodden and oppressed wherever found on the Western frontier.

Overmire and Weilly had brought in a rare prize, and they knew it. These accoutrements would be worth a fortune in bounty money if it could be proved that this Wayne Morgan was their owner.

"Well—ever see these duds before?" Sheriff Housel demanded.

Morgan shrugged. "Whatever I say, you won't believe me. In your mind you've already branded me as the Masked Rider."

Trent Overmire set aside his coffee cup and smiled grimly.

"I think I can prove you and the Masked Rider are one and the same man, stranger," the railroad detective said positively. "How? Listen. It's well known that the Masked Rider's black stallion is a one-man bronc. Sol and I tried to fork him tonight, and got bucked off in a hurry. And we've ridden our share of rough ones in our time, before we pinned on these badges."

The sheriff was staring at Overmire, in a puzzled way. "I don't get the drift, Trent," the lawman protested.

Morgan understood well enough. He was going to be forced to attempt a ride on Midnight's hurricane deck. And if the big stallion permitted him to so much as mount, his doom would be sealed. Any court in the land would accept that evidence.

"I got the Masked Rider's horse out at the rack, hombre," Overmire was saying. "I want the sheriff to see you try and ride him. I reckon a horse knows his own master. If the big stallion don't shy and start sunfishin' when you fork his kak, I've been pushin' the right hunch."

With a numb sense that destiny was forcing him into a trap from which there would be no escape, Wayne Morgan followed the railroad detectives out of the Warbonnet jail. Lamplight from the sher-

iff's office put its radiance on the four lather-flecked horses at Housel's tie bar. Midnight and the pack-horse, the hammerhead roan and Blue Hawk's gray.

"Straddle the black," Housel ordered, "and don't try anything fishy. You just try to make a getaway, and you'll be shot down before you can get acrost the street."

Wordlessly, Wayne Morgan headed across the plank sidewalk toward the waiting Midnight. The magnificent black animal headed up when it caught Morgan's scent and whickered plaintively in recognition. The sheriff and Overmire exchanged triumphant glances. This stallion knew the big waddy; any horseman could see that.

But the real test would come when their prisoner mounted the Brazos-horned saddle!

CHAPTER IV

Rubio's Vengeance

DUCKING under the hitch-bar, Morgan hooked one ox-bow stirrup over the horn and reached for the latigo to tighten the girth. The shadow of his own body prevented the lawmen from seeing what he did next.

From a pocket of his chaps, Wayne Morgan removed a sharp-pointed horseshoe nail he had carried since making a repair job on a loose shoe at the Piñon Peak camp the day before.

In the act of tightening the hair cincha of the saddle, Morgan thrust the horseshoe nail through a hole in the cinch strap, the sharp point resting on Midnight's sleek hide. When he unhooked the stirrup from the dish-shaped Mexican horn, the nail was hidden from view.

Sheriff Housel and the two railroad detectives, all with guns out of holster to prevent any attempt on the part of their prisoner to escape, crowded forward eagerly. They saw the husky puncher untie the reins and set a cowboot to stirrup.

As he put his weight on the stirrup and prepared to swing astride the saddle, Morgan's weight drove the horse-shoe nail into Midnight's hide.

With a shrill snort of pain, the big black tried to dance out from under the mounting rider. Reins gripped in his left hand, his right fisted over the saddle-horn, Morgan swung his right leg over the cantle and hit the kak, his full weight crowding the sharp nail deeper into the stallion's hide.

What happened next was too explosively swift for the three lawmen to see accurately. There was a confused blur of dust and threshing hoofs on the adobe street as Midnight swapped ends, squealing with pain and anger. Morgan faked his own distress beautifully, missing the right stirrup with his other boot.

Midnight's eyes rolled whitely, his teeth flashed. Morgan yelled in well-feigned dismay as the big black swallowed his head, yanking the reins from his grasp. Then, his back arching like a broken clock spring, he bucked the rider headlong out of saddle.

Wayne Morgan felt himself flying through space. He landed on all fours dangerously close to the hind legs of Blue Hawk's gray saddler, next in line at the sheriff's rack. Midnight, flesh still smarting from the needle-prick of the concealed horse-shoe nail, bolted out into the night and vanished from view behind the palmetto trees which bordered the Warbonnet plaza.

Morgan came to his feet, shaking his head as if groggy. His remorse at having inflicted minor torture on his beloved stallion was allayed as he heard Overmire's disgruntled voice:

"Well, I'd be a hell of a man not to admit I was wrong. That waddy sure *tried* to make a ride of it."

Housel came around the hitching-rack and reached for Morgan's arm, disappointment stamped on his weather-beaten face. So far as the sheriff was concerned, the black stallion's refusal to allow this saddle bum to ride him was conclusive evidence that Morgan was not the Masked Rider.

"Hope we round up that black come

daylight," Housel grunted, leading Morgan across the board walk toward the jail office. "The sheriff from Flagstaff'll want to impound that horse."

Wayne Morgan was not prepared for what happened next. As the sheriff was escorting him toward the jail steps, he became aware of a pound of heavy boots on the board walk. Four men suddenly rushed away from the shadows alongside the jailhouse wall. Was this Kent Sebastian's promised rescue try?

Blinded by the glare of lantern light pouring through the office doorway, he could not recognize the burly figure of the man who charged Sheriff Mort Housel from the side. All he knew was that Housel's grip was torn from his sleeve as the Warbonnet lawmen went down, clubbed across the skull with a gun-barrel.

STARING incredulously, Morgan saw Overmire and his deputy go down before the clubbing blows of Winchester stocks as the attackers closed in on them. The next instant a lariat noose dropped around Wayne Morgan's neck and he felt himself being hauled roughly off his feet by the big man who had just gun-whipped the sheriff.

In falling his head struck the corner of the jail step and his senses blanked out. His last thought was that this could hardly be Kent Sebastian's way of effecting a jail break.

Later—he had no way of knowing that ten minutes had elapsed—Morgan's senses cleared. He was astonished to find himself mounted on his own roan, his wrists lashed to the saddle-horn with rawhide thongs. The lariat was still around his neck.

Cool night wind in his face revived him. He was vaguely aware that the hammerhead roan was traveling at a hard gallop across the open prairie, and that he was boxed in by four captors.

A full moon was hanging low in the Arizona sky, directly ahead, its silver disc apparently tangled in the gnarled limbs of a dead live-oak. Reaching the shadow of that tree, the four riders reined up and Morgan got his first glimpse of his abductor.

The man holding the other end of the lass'-rope looped about his neck was the sheep rancher, Rubio Drumheller!

The man's evil bearded face was framed in a blood-stained bandage which covered the welt on his skull suffered when the railroad agent had knocked him out at the station.

"What's the idea?" Morgan gasped out, unable to fathom this sudden reversal of his fortunes.

Rubio Drumheller loosed an angry epithet. "Huh?" he asked.

"You got no call to rough me up. What's the idea?"

Drumheller stared balefully at his prisoner. His red-rimmed, piglike eyes glinted with pure hate, and there was a fetid scent of liquor on his breath.

"The idea, my friend?" the sheepman rasped bitterly. "The idea is that a couple of ticks from now you're goin' to be dancin' a jig at the bottom of a hangrope!"

As he spoke, Drumheller tossed the slack end of the lasso over a thick overhanging limb of the live-oak. One of his men led the roan into position under the limb and drew the rope taut, lashing it around the trunk of the tree.

"Wait a minute!" Morgan shouted angrily, as Drumheller drew a stock knife from a scabbard concealed in one boot leg and spurred over alongside the roan, preparatory to cutting the pigging strings which bound Morgan's wrists to the horn. "I'm not one of them train wreckers, if that's what you're thinkin'!"

Drumheller did not appear to be listening.

"Ever cent I had in the world was invested in them Spanish Merinos you and your gang wiped out," the sheepman panted thickly. "I mortgaged myself to the hilt to buy Spence Mallory's spread over at Table Rock. There's no law agin my runnin' sheep on the Mesa, only Kent Sebastian's law. Well, *I'm* layin' down some law tonight—with a hangrope."

Mention of Kent Sebastian's name reminded Wayne Morgan of something

which might save his neck in this desperate extremity.

"Listen, Drumheller," Morgan said. "The hombre back of that train wreck goes by the name of Crowfant. Know of him?"

Drumheller drew back, his savage countenance twisting.

"So you're one of Doak Crowfant's hardcases, eh? One of the badlands bunch! Well, all the more reason you're goin' to get your neck broke, feller. Maybe this'll teach the Cowmen's Association not to fetch in hired killers from the badlands to keep my sheep off the Mesa!"

BLUE HAWK

DRUMHELLER reached out to sever the leather thongs from Morgan's wrists. And Morgan knew that his doom was sealed. Drumheller had merely to drive a boot toe into the roan's ribs to send the horse bolting out from under the rider. Even if he could grab the rope and break the shock, they would leave him dangling under this oak to die of slow strangulation.

Even as that thought was streaking through Morgan's dazed brain, the night suddenly exploded to a concussion of gunshots, blending with the swift drumroll of approaching hoofs.

One of Drumheller's men gasped out an oath and rocked violently in saddle. The one who had made the hangrope fast yelled a warning and vaulted into his waiting saddle.

Twisting around in saddle, Wayne Morgan caught sight of a body of horsemen moving in fast over the lip of a rise. They were coming from the direction of Warbonnet's twinkling lights, half a mile to the northward.

Bore flames ripped the night like flying sparks. When Morgan glanced around again, he saw Rubio Drumheller spurring away into the further chaparral, his six-gun answering the heavy rifle fire of the oncoming riders.

Standing up in the stirrups, calming his nervous mount in a low voice, Morgan reached over his head and struggled to loosen the constricting noose.

His rescuers reined up in a thick smudge of dust, five of them. The blended odors of burned gunpowder and horse sweat wafted to Morgan's nostrils as he succeeded in pulling the deadly hangrope over his head.

Then, through the whirling dust, he recognized the leader of the cavalcade —the Cowmen's Association chief, Kent Sebastian, the man who appeared to hold the whip hand here on Owlhorn Mesa.

"Close call, I reckon," Sebastian panted hoarsely. "Me and the boys were just leavin' the Index Saloon across the street from the jail when we heard the sheriff holler for help. He said somebody had grabbed you, five minutes before. We were lucky there wasn't wind enough to scatter your dust."

Wayne Morgan grinned ruefully, massaging his rope-scorched neck.

"It was Rubio Drumheller and three other fellers, Mr. Sebastian," Morgan said. "Clouted me on the head. By the time I came to them sheepherders had already picked out this hangtree."

Sebastian clipped a sharp order to his riders: "Get back to town, boys. We won't be bringin' this prisoner back to the sheriff. Tell Housel we lost the trail in the *brasada* thickets."

Morgan picked up the roan's reins and sat his saddle in keyed-up suspense, not sure how this situation was going. Minus his gun harness, he would have no way of defending himself if Sebastian intended to kill him in cold blood.

After Sebastian's men had vanished over the ridge, heading back toward Warbonnet town, Sebastian leaned over to unbuckle one of his saddle pockets.

"Crowfant has told me he hand-picked his men and trusts every one of you completely," Sebastian said, taking a brick-sized parcel wrapped in heavy brown paper from the saddle-bag. "I reckon you'll be goin' straight back to his hide-out tonight, won't you?"

Wayne Morgan nodded, playing this case of mistaken identity to the hilt. He had no idea what was in Sebastian's head.

"In that case I'll send this to Crowfant by you," Sebastian continued, handing Morgan the paper-wrapped parcel. "This will save your boss the trouble of ridin' over to my ranch to pick it up as he had planned to do day after tomorrow."

Morgan thrust the package under his shirt and grinned bleakly.

"I sure thank you for savin' my neck just now, Mr. Sebastian."

SEBASTIAN curveted his buckskin pony around preparatory to leaving. "*'Sta nada.*" He laughed. "Saved me the job of thinkin' up a way to get you out of Housel's jail. Tell Crowfant he did a good thorough job with that sheep train. *Hasta luego.*"

Morgan called out sharply, "Just a minute, sir. How about my Indian pardner? We can't leave him in jail."

The Owlhorn Mesa cattle baron shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but gettin' that redskin out will have to be Crowfant's worry. I can't openly oppose the law, you know, even if I did put Housel behind the star. Crowfant will understand."

Kent Sebastian touched his buckskin's flanks with his spurs and was gone at a full gallop, soon vanishing over the crest of the cactus-spined hogback.

"Well, horse," Morgan said musingly to the hammerhead roan, "where do we go from here?"

He had a tough decision to make right now. It would be crowding his luck too far if he returned to Warbonnet tonight and attempted to get Blue Hawk out of the sheriff's custody. Housel would probably anticipate something of the kind and have a heavy guard at the jail for the rest of the night.

It would not do for him to seek shelter in the black recesses of the *brasada* thickets to the southward, either. Not while the vengeful Rubio Drumheller and his three gunhawks were prowling somewhere behind that brushy jungle.

All in all, Morgan was in a thoroughly dangerous situation. He was a marked man so far as Warbonnet was concerned, and there was not another settlement

within a hundred miles, so far as he knew, where he could buy a gun and some grub.

Getting some food in his belly was vitally important, but attempting to buy supplies in Warbonnet was out of the question. He had not eaten since yesterday noon, up on Piñon Peak, and hunger was beginning to gnaw insistently.

He had some .45 and .30-30 ammunition in his saddlebags, but the sheriff had his guns, as well as the set of matched black-stocked Peacemakers which he carried in the rôle of the Masked Rider. The saddle-boot under his right knee had been emptied of his Winchester carbine, probably by one of the railroad detectives who had appropriated the roan at Rosario Canyon.

"Midnight's on the loose," Morgan thought. "But knowin' where he saw me last he'll drift back to that hitch rack before mornin'."

CHAPTER V

A Job for the Masked Rider

MOONLIGHT gilded the rocky pyramid that was Piñon Peak, the dominating landmark on the horizon. Morgan headed the hammerhead roan in that direction. He could not linger in the vicinity of this hangman's tree without running the risk of being recaptured by Drumheller's sheepherders.

He put the jaded mount into a foxtrot, the lights of Warbonnet's saloons wheeling slowly on the horizon to his right as he headed toward the remote loom of Piñon Peak. Releasing Blue Hawk from jail was going to be tough to handle, but until his Yaqui comrade was at his side again Morgan could not think of resuming his flight.

Two hours later, the cerise stain of approaching dawn on the eastern skyline warned Morgan to pick a place where he could lie low during the daylight hours. He finally elected to take his chances on the vast sea of mesquite and junco jungle through which the Border & Southwestern Railroad tracks tunneled their arrow-straight course toward the Peak.

A mile back in the tangled chaparral, he off-saddled and hobbled the exhausted roan. Mesquite beans would have to be his mount's diet tonight. The need for sleep was overpowering. And Morgan would have pawned a year of his life, right now, for a sip of water.

He sat down to shuck his cowboots, and was reminded of the mysterious package which Kent Sebastian had entrusted to his keeping. Scribbled on the paper wrapper was the name "Doak Crowfant." Morgan broke the string and unwrapped the package.

Day's first light revealed a thick bundle of paper money. Yellow-backs and greenbacks, in fives, tens, twenties. No counterfeit *dinero,* this.

"Fifty thousand dollars!" Morgan totaled the bills. "What Kent Sebastian is willing to pay to keep sheep off Owlhorn Mesa cattle range." He chuckled. "I imagine Señor Doak Crowfant is goin' to be plumb upset when this murder money don't reach his gang."

Forgetting the money and everything else then, he laid his head on his saddle and went to sleep.

It was mid-afternoon when Wayne Morgan roused himself from that fitful sleep. He felt physically refreshed, though, and the splitting headache—the aftermath of last night's clubbing—had left him. But he was hungry, desperately hungry, and thirsty.

Saddling up, he headed out of the chaparral. He had to remember that the big posse from Flagstaff was still scouring the Arizona malpais for his sign. There also was the risk of Mort Housel picking up his trail at Drumheller's hangtree and tracing him to this hideout.

Crossing the railroad tracks, Morgan continued along a game trail through the heavy thickets of flowering agarita and chokeberry brush. He came to a break in the thorny junco and saw a mile-square clearing in front of him.

Directly ahead, not a hundred yards

away, was a homesteader's cabin, smoke curling from a tin stovepipe. Laundry hung limp on a clothes line, gleaming in the sun's rays. There was not enough breeze to turn the vanes of a rusty windmill alongside a small adobe-walled barn, but the sheet-iron tanks under the mill tower brimmed with water and the thirsty roan fought the bit, scenting a drink.

A wagon road stretched off to the eastward, no doubt linking this outlying sodbuster's farm with Warbonnet. Hunger pangs decided Morgan. He would risk paying a visit to the homesteader's shack and asking for a hand-out. If hostile riders appeared, he would be able to spot them and make a break for the brush.

Approaching the house, he caught sight of a girl in a pink gingham dress busy washing clothes in the shade of a big cottonwood. She looked up at his approach, teeth flashing in a friendly smile.

Morgan felt a twinge of regret for his own fugitive existence as he saw the sunlight playing on the girl's wheat-blonde tresses. She was around twenty, he judged, her body seductively curved, her skin gleaming with health. But long ago he had decided that his life denied him a woman's love.

REINING up, Morgan tipped his Stetson and smiled, hoping that his unshaven jaws and trail-dusty garb did not make him appear too much like a saddle tramp.

"Howdy, ma'am. Ridin' through. Any chance for a cup of java and maybe a slice of cornbread?"

The girl skimmed soapsuds off her wrists and dried her hands on her apron as she walked out toward him.

"Light," she gave him the traditional Western welcome. "You'll find cured clover hay over in the stable for your pony. I'm Pamela Mallory. This is Jerry Kellogg's homestead. He is the man I'm going to marry."

Dismounting, Morgan said casually, "Wayne Morgan is my brand. I'm much obliged for your hospitality."

He watered his roan. It felt good, washing up at the windmill trough. He did not unsaddle, knowing he might have to leave the homestead in a hurry, but he hitched the horse at the corral fence and brought out an armload of hay from the barn.

When he entered the cabin he was greeted by a man in his middle sixties, a veteran cowman by the look of his saddle-warped legs and the rope calluses on the fingers of the hand that gripped the visitor's.

"Brand is Spence Mallory," the oldster said, taking a corncob pipe from his bush of brindle-colored whiskers. "Pamela there is my daughter. We're campin' here at Jerry's place temporary."

The girl was putting a hungry man's dream of a meal on the oilcloth-covered table in the center of the room—biscuits fresh from the oven, wild clover honey, cold ham and fried potatoes, an apricot pie with whipped cream, and a mug of steaming black coffee.

"Spence Mallory?" Morgan repeated, as he attacked the repast with a starving man's relish. "Seems I've heard of you, sir. Didn't you used to own the ranch that Rubio Drumheller bought with the idea of raisin' sheep here on the Mesa?"

Old Mallory sputtered angrily.

"Kent Sebastian's cattle syndicate stole my ranch, you mean!" snorted the oldtimer. "Oh, for the record, I lost it for nonpayment of taxes. But Sebastian's hand was behind the rustlin' that whittled my herd and shoved me into bankruptcy. In a way, I'm almost glad Drumheller moved in and outbid Sebastian for my Box M. Not that I cotton to seein' this range sheeped out, you understand. I'm agin sheep, like any decent cowman would be."

Pamela asked curiously, "You live hereabouts, Mr. Morgan?"

He shook his head. "Just passin' through, ma'am. But a drifter hears scraps of range gossip. This Kent Sebastian, now—"

Morgan broke off as his ears caught a rattle of hoofbeats. A rider was approaching the cabin at a gallop, from the Warbonnet wagon road. Instinctively Morgan

dropped a hand to where his gun usually hung. Through the open doorway he saw a husky young rider reining up outside, and he wondered frantically if he had been caught napping here by a deputy sheriff. He had been too busy eating to keep an eye out for danger.

"That's Jerry!" Pamela cried. "Jerry Kellogg! Must be bringing news from town, to ride Prince so hard in this heat."

Morgan relaxed, resuming his meal. Pamela ran out to greet her future husband, and the two came into the cabin arm in arm. As Morgan shook hands with the young homesteader, he was instantly drawn to the black-haired, blue-eyed young fellow.

"Go right on eatin', Mr. Morgan," Jerry said. "You'll pardon me if I'm full of news." The rugged young giant turned to old Mallory. "All hell's bustin' hereabouts, Pop! Latest thing is that the Masked Rider is supposed to be hidin' somewhere hereabouts. Sheriff Housel thinks he's got the Masked Rider's Indian pard locked up in his jail—calls him Blue Hawk. And that ain't all the news I picked up in town this mornin'. Warbonnet's buzzin' like a busted beehive. Rubio Drumheller's trainload of sheep didn't show up after all—and—"

MORGAN went on eating as he heard young Kellogg give the Mallorys a somewhat exaggerated version of what had happened at Rosario Canyon. Owlhorn Mesa's first reaction to the news of the tragedy was one of happy enthusiasm over the loss of Drumheller's sheep, although Kellogg admitted that the decent citizenry were outraged at the loss of human life involved in the wreck.

In the excitement of what he had to tell Mallory and his daughter, Kellogg made no mention of having heard of Housel losing a prisoner from his jail last night, Morgan noticed.

When Kellogg had joined Morgan for a bite to eat, Spence Mallory stoked his corncob with tobacco and said morosely,

[*Turn page*]

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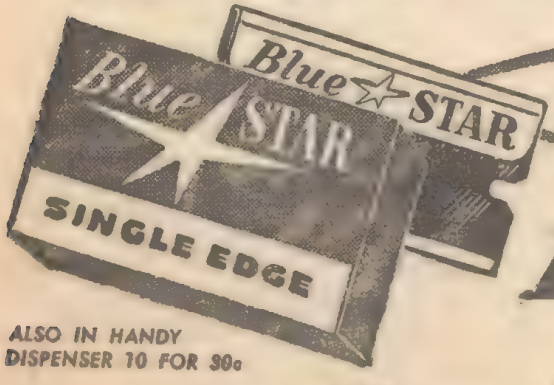

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"You know, I hope that Injun the sheriff's got locked up don't turn out to be Blue Hawk. I don't share all this talk goin' around about the Masked Rider, none a-tall. No sir."

Morgan looked up from devouring a slab of Pamela's delicious apricot pie.

"You think the Masked Rider isn't as some folks paint him, eh, Mr. Mallory?" he asked conversationally.

Mallory slapped his knee emphatically. "Not a bit of it, Morgan. I grant you, some folks think this Masked Rider is a kind of a childish show-off, with his black mask and his black cloak and all. But I've heard too much about what this here Robin Hood rider as some call him has done for people who were down and out. I think this Masked Rider dolls up in that story-book cos-toom of his'n just as a means of strikin' terror into the hearts of evil-doers. If'n I ever had the chance, I'd back the Masked Rider's play to the last chip in the pot. Yes sir."

Pamela laughed lightly. "You'll probably never get the chance, Dad," she said. "From what I hear, the Masked Rider is a pretty slippery lobo. He's been dodging the law for as long as *I* can remember. If Sheriff Housel *has* got his Indian friend in jail, I bet he won't keep him long. Not if the Masked Rider is still alive, he won't."

Wayne Morgan felt a warm glow suffuse his veins. It was not often that he heard his exploits praised in such wholehearted fashion as this.

"In a pinch," he thought, "I could depend on Mallory here to back my play."

Jerry Kellogg went to the stove and poured himself another cup of coffee. He pulled Pamela into his arms and kissed her soundly on the lips. The girl, catching Morgan's amused glance, blushed and said scoldingly, "Jerry—not in front of strangers!"

"Long as I'm in love with you, I don't care who knows it, Pam!" Kellogg laughed, returning to the table. Then he sobered. "Pop," he said to Mallory, "I'm afraid that Indian *is* the Blue Hawk, the Masked Rider's pard. The sheriff has got the masked man's black stallion in the county stable behind the courthouse. I seen him myself. Prettiest hunk of horseflesh you ever saw. What's more, the sheriff's got the Masked Rider's black clothes in his office. Seems a couple of railroad detectives found the stallion in a camp up on Piñon Peak yesterday."

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Morgan thought heavily, "So Midnight drifted back to the jail. At least I know he's being fed and groomed."

Kellogg went on, "As a matter of fact, Pop, the talk in town is that the Masked Rider was behind that wreckin' of the sheep train. Kent Sebastian's braggin' that the feller deserves a medal for pulling off that massacre."

HIS meal finished, Morgan got to his feet.

"From what Mr. Mallory told me, Jerry," he said earnestly, "he lost his ranch because of Kent Sebastian. It's too bad the Masked Rider wasn't around to help defend the Box M."

Old Man Mallory laughed bitterly. "Sebastian's Cowmen's Association—it's nothin' more or less than a syndicate made up of ranchers who wear Sebastian's collar. They wanted the Box M for the water rights it controlled. His rustlers —I can't prove this, you understand— whittled away at my herd till I was too deep in debt to pull out."

Kellogg also laughed bitterly. "But when the Box M came up for auction, Sebastian was caught with his tail in a crack. He didn't have the cash to buy Pop's ranch, like he thought. He hadn't counted on this Drumheller hombre from

Texas showin' up and buyin' the Box M for sheep."

"And so," Mallory grumbled, "Pam and me found ourselves without a roof over our heads, and Sebastian seen my ranch fall into the clutches of a sheepherdin' son. We had to move in on Jerry here, crowdin' him out of house and home."

Pamela said with obvious embarrassment, "Don't burden Mr. Morgan with our personal misfortunes, Dad, please!"

Morgan thanked the girl for her hospitality. Much as he was enjoying himself here, he knew he must get back into hiding. Too much chance of roving possemen dropping in on Jerry's place.

"If the Masked Rider really is prowlin' the brush hereabouts," he said, "I imagine he won't leave the country before provin' he wasn't back of that train wreck, folks. I share your good opinion of the Masked Rider. Maybe he has got a price on his head, but he got it defendin' innocent people like you from land-grabbin' cattle rustlers like this Kent Sebastian."

The Mallorys and young Kellogg followed Morgan out to where his roan stood hitched to the corral fence. They were patently hungry for visitors at this out-of-the-way homestead.

"Drop in and cool your saddle any time you're ridin' through this neck of the woods, Morgan," Jerry Kellogg invited.

Mounting, Morgan said cryptically, "I'll be doin' that, I have a hunch. *Muchas gracias,* folks."

Fifteen minutes later, lost in the trackless thickets which encircled Kellogg's homestead, Wayne Morgan unsaddled again. As soon as it got dark he would be riding for Warbonnet, knowing he must somehow contrive to wrest Blue Hawk from Housel's custody.

Once that was achieved, he intended to delve into the matter of Kent Sebastian's skulduggery here in Owlhorn Basin. Where innocent people like Spence Mallory and his lovely daughter were victimized by range barons of Sebastian's stripe, there was a job of rangeland justice to take care of. A job made to order for the Masked Rider!

CHAPTER VI

Housel Shows His Colors

RIDING into Warbonnet alone and unarmed was risky. Morgan was fair bullet-bait for any citizen of the cowtown who might recognize him as Sheriff Housel's escaped prisoner. Realizing that risk, Wayne Morgan avoided the main street entrance to the settlement, where blazing tar barrels and kerosene torches illuminated the clapboard façades of Warbonnet's twenty-odd saloons and honky-tonks.

Instead, he entered town by way of the shipping corrals, a furtive figure invisible in the mealy darkness, and ground-tied his roan under the palmettos bordering the town plaza.

An atmosphere of tension pervaded the Owlhorn Mesa cowboy hangout tonight. For one thing, the big trail-weary posse from Flagstaff was in Warbonnet. Morgan himself had seen Sheriff Paulson's dejected man-hunters following the railroad tracks toward town, from his concealment in the *brasada* thickets late in the afternoon.

The Masked Rider's name would be on every lip. Undoubtedly the masked man's Yaqui *compadre* had undergone hours of grueling questioning from the Flagstaff lawman, over in Mort Housel's jail. There was, of course, no definite proof that the Indian the sheriff had behind bars was the Masked Rider's partner. But there was no knowing what the temper of this town, dominated by Kent Sebastian's rule, might decide to do about Blue Hawk.

Crossing the star-lighted plaza on his way toward the jailhouse, Wayne Morgan fingered Kent Sebastian's package of greenbacks, under his shirt. He felt sure that as long as Sebastian thought Blue Hawk a member of Doak Crowfant's owlhool legion, the Indian was safe from lynching. But what if Crowfant's real representative had shown up, asking for the promised pay-off for demolishing the

train carrying Drumheller's sheep?

It was against that possibility that Morgan was intent upon breaking Blue Hawk out of jail tonight. Every passing hour added to the Yaqui's peril though, in a way, the presence of the Flagstaff sheriff in town tonight was a protection for Blue Hawk. Rather than return to his home county empty-handed Sheriff Paulson might want to take Blue Hawk back to Flagstaff.

Reaching the squatty brick jail, Wayne Morgan skirted the west wall and halted under the lighted window of Housel's office. A quick peek through the window revealed that the office was deserted at the moment. The sheriff was probably off duty, in which case Warbonnet would be under the control of a night marshal.

Rounding the front of the jail, Morgan paused alongside the porch steps, keening the night. He could hear the rowdy voices of cowpunchers reveling in the town's deadfalls and dance halls, the tinpanny music of nickelodeons, the brassy laughter of percentage girls in a nearby fandango house. The street in the immediate vicinity of the jail was, at the moment at least, deserted except for an incoming train of tandem-hitched freight wagons drawn by a jerkline string of mules.

Taking advantage of the heavy dust kicked up by the twenty mules on the alkali-carpeted street, Wayne Morgan reached for the door knob of the sheriff's office, found the door unlocked, and moved quickly inside the two-by-four office.

His raking glance took in details—walls papered with reward dodgers, including one which listed a $2,000 reward on the Masked Rider's scalp, dead or alive, Housel's littered roll-top desk, the corner stove with a coffee pot simmering on it, the varnished panels of a locked gun cabinet, the solid iron door to the cell block out back, another door alongside it which stood ajar to reveal a clothes closet filled with slickers and other odds and ends of clothing.

Recovering his six-guns and shell belts was Morgan's first objective. A quick search of the desk drawers revealed no trace of the weapons Housel had impounded. The gun cabinet was closed by a heavy padlock.

ALONGSIDE the desk was a heavy iron safe. It was, of course, locked. Inside that vault, Morgan felt certain, the sheriff would have stowed the saddle-bags containing the Masked Rider's clothing, unless he had already turned that prize over to the sheriff from Flagstaff. Which was unlikely.

A feeling of desperation washed over Morgan. He ran the risk of being gunned down without warning if any passerby happened to spot him. He strode quickly to the bullpen door, but it was locked. No chance to let Blue Hawk know that he was here.

Morgan moved over to the clothes closet, on the off chance that he might find a rifle or other weapon stored in there. He was going through the pockets of the coats and saddle slickers hanging from wall hooks when he heard a thud of high-heeled boots coming up the jail steps.

Wayne Morgan hunched into the black interior of the clothes closet and pulled the door shut behind him. The street door opened and Morgan, bathed in gelid sweat, heard the heavy voice of Kent Sebastian:

"You're forgettin' I put that star on your vest, Mort. I could kick you out of office just as easy."

Sheriff Housel crossed over to his swivel chair and Morgan heard the old lawman exhale a long sigh as he sat down. Squatting, Morgan peered through the keyhole in the closet door. He could see the Owlhorn Mesa cattle king standing facing Housel, his face ruddy with anger. Obviously these two were locking horns in a quarrel of some kind.

"I don't like it, Kent," the sheriff panted surlily. "The town seems to think your hand was back of that sheep train massacre. It ain't the loss of Drumheller's sheep that rowels me, you understand. It's the lives of four men lost in that caboose. That was murder, Kent!"

Sebastian laughed throatily. "Watch yourself, Housel. Don't get too big for your britches. If the town thinks I was back of those killin's, let 'em think it. Provin' it is somethin' else again."

Morgan saw Sebastian turn on his heel and stalk toward the door.

"Remember, Sheriff, your bread is buttered by my Cowmen's Association. Don't let the reformer's gossip back you into the wrong stall."

The door slammed hard as Kent Sebastian left the office. Wayne Morgan, shifting position so that he could get a look at

HE BEAT IT

By PECOS PETE

Back from the town the cowboy rode,
Pretty much disgusted—
He thought he'd beat the roulette wheel,
But had to beat it, busted!

the sheriff, felt his shoulder prod a heavy object in the pocket of a saddle slicker beside him.

Reaching a hand into the pocket, moving with infinite care to prevent the rustle of oilskin raincoats from betraying his hiding place to the sheriff seated at the office desk, Wayne Morgan felt his fingers curling about the walnut stock of a six-shooter.

New hope surged through him as he raised up to a standing position. A quick check of the gun's cylinder told him the weapon was unloaded. But a desperate man could run a good bluff with an empty Colt.

He heard Sheriff Housel muttering profanely to himself, then the lawman's footsteps as he walked over to the bullpen door. A heavy key grated in the lock, then Morgan heard the creak of unoiled hinges as the sheriff entered the bullpen, no doubt to check on his Indian prisoner.

Wayne Morgan let himself out of the stuffy closet and sidestepped quickly to put himself behind the open iron door of the cell-block. He heard the sheriff mutter something to Blue Hawk, then the sound of Housel's jinglebob spurs as he limped back toward the front office.

HOUSEL stepped through the doorway, reaching behind him to close the iron door. The next instant he was slumping to the floor, his bald skull rapped by the barrel of Morgan's empty six-shooter.

"Sorry, old-timer," Morgan whispered, "but I had to do it. Knowin' you're not Sebastian's man at heart puts you ace-high on my list."

Swiftly Morgan jerked the ring of jail keys from the pocket of the unconscious man's jumper. Hoisting Housel's limp shape over his shoulder, Morgan stepped quickly into the bullpen.

"Señor!" came the husky voice of Blue Hawk, as the Yaqui sprang up from his cell cot. "The sheriff told me you were killed last night!"

Morgan dumped Housel's sodden bulk onto the cot of an open cell and helped himself to the sheriff's loaded Army .45 before heading over to Blue Hawk's cell.

"Plumb exaggerated, Hawk," he chuckled, then grew serious. "We've got to work fast now. I didn't tap the sheriff's noggin so hard. He'll be comin' out of it before long."

The third key Morgan tried fitted the lock of Blue Hawk's cell. Taking the ring of keys with him, Morgan strode back to the front office, Blue Hawk's moccasined feet padding noiselessly behind him.

While the Yaqui drew a pin-holed green shade over the street window, Morgan located the small key to the padlock of the gun cabinet and opened the doors. His eye went instantly to his own cartridge belts and holstered Colts, hanging on a

peg along with a miscellaneous assortment of weapons confiscated from other prisoners in the past.

As he was buckling on the gun harness, Morgan's roving eye spotted the tooled leather saddle-bags which went with Midnight's kak. This was unexpected luck. The Masked Rider's accoutrements were once more in his possession! The *alforja* pouches had apparently been too bulky for the sheriff to hide in his small office safe, so he had put them in the gun cabinet.

"Come on!" Morgan whispered to his waiting Indian *compadre*. "I reckon we'll find Midnight and your gray and the pack-horse out in the sheriff's stable. We want to be long gone before Housel comes to his senses!"

CHAPTER VII

Robin Hood Outlaw

PAMELA MALLORY had retired to her lean-to bedroom at ten o'clock and left her father and young Jerry Kellogg in the kitchen, engrossed in their nightly round of checkers. The hands of the clock on the shelf stood at straight-up midnight.

As usual, old Spence had maneuvered his future son-in-law into an impossible situation. A wrong move now and Jerry would see his remaining checkers wiped off the board by the old cattleman's formidable array of kings.

"Might as well face it, kid," chuckled the old man. "Your game's gone sour tonight. You—"

Spence Mallory broke off, as a light rap sounded at the door of the cabin. Jerry Kellogg lifted his head, brow furrowing as he heard the knock repeated.

"Who could that be, this time of night?" Spence muttered waspishly, piqued at having the dramatic end of the checker game interrupted. "I'm in my sock feet, Jerry. Go see who 'tis."

Kellogg shoved back his chair and stepped to the door. They went for weeks on end without visitors and whoever was out there now made the second visitor to show up today, counting the brief call of young tumbleweed, Wayne Morgan, this afternoon.

Pulling the door wide, Kellogg stared out into the night without seeing anyone at first. Then every sinew in his body went as taut as an overwound clock-spring. Standing on the doorstep was a six-foot figure clad entirely in black, which made him almost invisible against the darkness outside. The only relieving accent to break the somber appearance of the black-hatted, black-shrouded figure was a flash of white teeth exposed in a grin, beneath eyes masked by a black domino.

"I come as a friend," spoke a vibrant bass voice in cultured accents. "I have it on good authority that the Masked Rider would find a welcome under this roof."

Spence Mallory upset his cane-bottomed chair in his haste to leave the table. Padding in his sock feet across the puncheon floor, the old cowman stared past the frozen figure of Jerry Kellogg at the man on the doorstep wearing a black domino mask over what could be seen of a sun-bronzed face.

"The Masked Rider, is it?" ejaculated the oldster, shoving Jerry aside. "Come in, *amigo*, and welcome! And your Injun pard, Blue Hawk, too, if he's with you. Heard you was supposed to be hidin' out in Owlhorn County."

The Robin Hood outlaw had to stoop to clear the high lintel of the cabin doorway. He extended a buckskin-gloved hand to take Mallory's shake. The overpowering magnetism of his personality seemed to fill the room with an electric vitality.

"I'm Spence Mallory and this is my son-in-law-to-be, Jerry Kellogg," the old man said, closing the door behind their black-cloaked visitor. "What I said about invitin' Blue Hawk in still goes. I been wantin' to meet you fellers for a long time, Masked Rider."

The black-clad rider of the danger trails accepted the chair which Jerry Kellogg, still amazed speechless, offered him.

"Blue Hawk is waiting out in the *brasada*, Mallory," the Masked Rider said. "You have probably guessed that I heard about you from my good friend, Wayne Morgan, who enjoyed your hospitality earlier today. From him I also learned something about the rough deal given you by a man named Kent Sebastian."

Kellogg spoke for the first time then, his eyes still staring incredulously at the dramatic figure of the Masked Rider.

"That's right, sir. We can't prove it, but it's common knowledge on the Mesa that Sebastian's organized rustlers, who call themselves the local Cowmen's Association, run Spence's Box M into bankruptcy."

THE Masked Rider flung back his sable-hued cape to reveal his black gun harness and black-stocked Colt .45s. From inside his shirt the mystery rider took an oblong package wrapped in brown paper. He placed it carefully on the deal table.

"According to Wayne Morgan, it was Sebastian's intention to buy the Box M at sheriff's auction, by due process of law," the Masked Rider said, "with the idea of gaining control of the water rights to San Ysidro creek, which heads on your range. But a sheepman named Drumheller pulled a surprise and outbid Sebastian at the auction. Is that correct?"

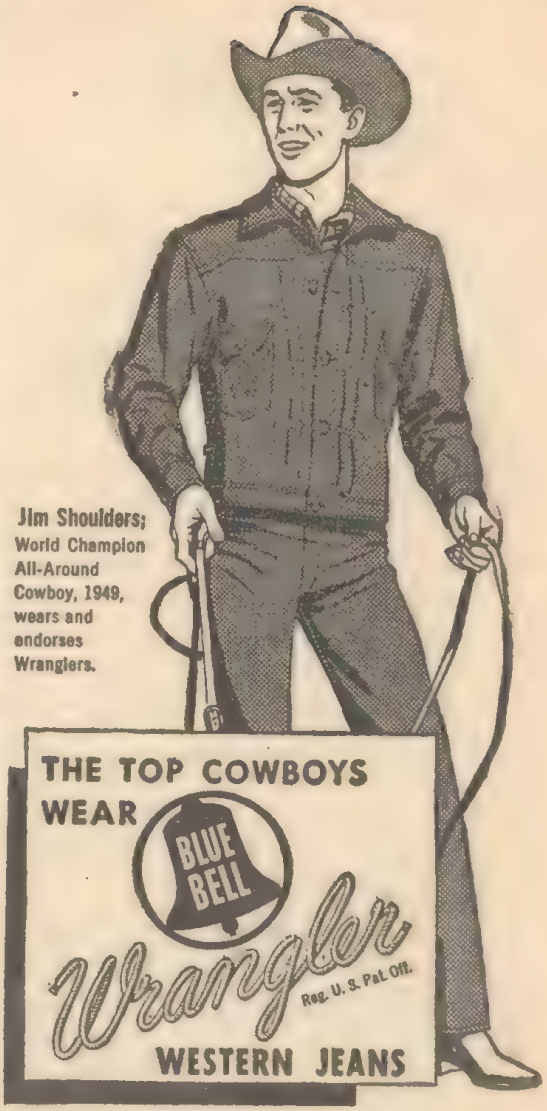
Spence Mallory exposed toothless gums under his mustache in an excited grin.

"Right as rain, pardner. Drumheller was goin' to stock the Box M with sheep. But Sebastian's gang wrecked the train bringin' them woolies to the Mesa yesterday, so—"

Young Kellogg said nervously, "You can't prove Sebastian was back of that wreck, Pop. Every man on his pay-roll had an alibi for his whereabouts yesterday, accordin' to Mort Housel."

"Fiddlesticks!" snorted the oldster. "It's plain as the nose on your face that Sebastian ordered them sheep slaughtered. Bad thing was, four members of the train crew died in that wreck."

[*Turn page*]



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The Masked Rider reached over to tap the brown-wrapped package he had laid on the table beside the checkerboard.

"This parcel," he said crisply, "contains fifty thousand dollars in paper *dinero*. I happen to have positive proof that Kent Sebastian intended that money for an outlaw by the name of Doak Crowfant, whose buscaderos did the actual derailing of that sheep train at Piñon Peak yesterday."

This was too much for even Spence Mallory. He and his young friend stared at the bundle of greenbacks as if bewitched.

"Crowfant, huh?" Kellogg finally broke the silence to say. "A gunhawk who holes up in the badlands west of here. If—if you could prove this, Masked Rider, we'd have Kent Sebastian's neck in a hang-rope!"

The Masked Rider smiled mysteriously. "I aim to prove it, and shortly," he said. "You see, the rumor is out that *I* was back of that outrage. I can't let that charge stand."

Mallory licked his lips. "How'd you come to be in possession of Sebastian's pay-off for Crowfant, *amigo*?"

The Masked Rider shrugged. "That's a long story, friend. The reason I rode out to your homestead for this pow-wow tonight is this: when Crowfant goes to Sebastian to collect his pay, Sebastian will realize he gave that package to the wrong man. Crowfant will accuse Sebastian of trying to welsh on his deal. By playing those two hardcases against each other, I think we may rid Owlhorn Mesa of Sebastian's tyranny for all time."

The Robin Hood rider stood up, towering over the pair of amazed listeners.

"Drumheller is going to lose the Box M," he went on. "He's stone broke, by his own admission. Which means Sheriff Housel will be putting the Box M on the auction block again shortly. How much did Drumheller pay for your ranch, Mallory?"

"Eighteen thousand. It's worth ten times that, easy."

The Masked Rider picked up the Sebastian package and put it in Mallory's hand.

"This *dinero*," he said, "is yours—to buy the Box M back with when it goes on the block again. All except eighteen thousand of it, which I want you to get into Drumheller's hands. Drumheller may be a sheepherder and a roughneck, but after all, the man didn't *steal* your ranch—and he lost his shirt when he lost those sheep."

MALLORY'S toothless jaws opened and closed like a fish out of water.

"You mean—this money—is our'n?"

"Do you want me to deliver it to Crowfant?" the Masked Rider asked. "Sure it's yours. There'll be enough to buy your ranch back, I'm thinking—because Kent Sebastian won't be around to bid against you, if my plans work out."

Tears of gratitude sparkled in Mallory's faded eyes. Before he could thank the mystery rider, the masked man went on:

"Crowfant will be leaving the badlands tomorrow to collect his pay at Sebastian's ranch. Where is that located?"

Young Kellogg said eagerly, "The Slash S? You follow the river about fifteen miles until you see a ramblin' California-style *hacienda* built on a bluff. But you ain't thinkin' of walkin' into Sebastian's den, are you? With the whole country stirred up, wantin' to line their gunsights on you for your bounty?"

The Masked Rider walked over to the cabin door and turned to grin enigmatically at the two men.

"I intend to be on hand," he said, "when Doak Crowfant or one of his badlands bunch shows up at the Slash S to collect their pay for wrecking that sheep train. As a matter of fact, Sebastian told Wayne Morgan that Crowfant planned to call for that package of money some time tomorrow."

The Masked Rider opened the door and was lost immediately in the outer darkness, his black garb rendering him totally invisible. His resonant bass voice floated back:

"Needless to say, I can hardly pay you a visit in the daytime, gentleman. My friend, Wayne Morgan, is leaving the country for reasons of his own. But you'll find out quickly enough the outcome of

Sebastian's and Crowfant's meeting. *Hasta la vista.*"

Spence Mallory and Jerry Kellogg stood shoulder to shoulder in the shack doorway, staring into the night. Now that the Masked Rider was gone, it was hard to believe that this whole episode had not been a figment of their imaginations.

But they had the bundle of greenbacks as proof of the visit. And out in the night they heard the soft noise of a horse blowing its lips, the creak of saddle leather as the Robin Hood outlaw mounted his black steed.

Hoofs made a fading rataplan across the flats toward the rimming chaparral. Then silence enveloped the brooding night.

Kellogg squeezed the old man's arm.

"Pop," the young homesteader whispered in awe-struck solemnity, "I believe that Masked Rider jasper is goin' to get your Table Rock spread back for you all right! And smash Kent Sebastian's dirty hold on Owlhorn Mesa as well!"

Mallory whispered brokenly, "God go with you, Masked Rider. I knew I wasn't mistaken in my good opinion of you."

Another dawn was flaming across the tawny reaches of the Arizona landscape when the Masked Rider unsaddled his black stallion in the dense stand of cottonwoods and willow brake which furred the alluvial slope between the bluff and the San Ysidro River bank. He was on Sebastian's Slash S range now.

He had chosen to make this trek alone, leaving Blue Hawk back at their secret camp a short distance from Jerry Kellogg's homestead. At the rim of the bluff directly over him stood the tile-roofed, adobe-walled California-style ranchhouse which was Kent Sebastian's home. It was the only ranch layout answering Kellogg's description that he had encountered during his night-long ride along the twisting north bank of the river.

The steep face of the bluff was heavily carpeted with chaparral. Determined to get as close as possible to Sebastian's headquarters before full daylight, the Masked Rider began his ascent of the bluff wall, worming his way through the buckbrush and agarita with the stealth of a wild animal.

REACHING the rim of the bluff, the Masked Rider was delighted to find a thick hedge of prickly pear and low-growing juniper rimming the neatly tended front yard of the Slash S. Shadows would lie deep and unbroken inside this hedge throughout the day and his black clothing would enable him to blend perfectly with his background, and still be within a pebble's toss of Sebastian's front door.

He squirmed his way to a point where he could command a sweeping view not only of the tile-roofed gallery which fronted the Slash S ranchhouse, but also the road which curved off in sweeping loops down the west slope of the commanding bluff. The Warbonnet bridge was downstream half a mile.

In all probability the outlaw, Doak Crowfant, would be riding up that road some time today, for this was no idle gamble on the Masked Rider's part. With his own ears he had heard Kent Sebastian say that Crowfant had intended to call at the Slash S today to pick up his pay for wrecking Drumheller's sheep train.

The Masked Rider made himself comfortable in the cool shade of the cactus hedge, munching a breakfast which Blue Hawk had packed for him in their camp —dried dates, pemmican, bar chocolate, a juicy apple, washed down with water from the canteen slung over his shoulder. In all probability he would be here until sundown, so he divided his pocket rations accordingly.

As daylight brightened, the Slash S came to life. Cowhands trooped out of a bunkhouse beyond the ranchhouse and made their way to a cookshack in response to the *cocinero's* clanging call on an iron triangle. After breakfast, riders began leaving the spread for their day's work. That the Slash S was a prosperous, big-scale spread, the Masked Rider could see.

Behind the big red barns to northward a blacksmith started making music with hammer and anvil. A buckaroo was break-

ing a fuzztail over in one of the corrals. The Masked Rider got his first glimpse of Kent Sebastian when the big ranchman left his house and strolled out to watch the bucking horse.

The sun climbed higher. It was cool and comfortable here in the Masked Rider's spiny lookout post. His main concern was to keep from dozing off. A restless man, inactivity irked him.

Shortly before twelve o'clock, he saw something which brought his every nerve and sinew tinglingly alert. Off through the heat-dancing distance to westward, a lone rider was crossing the Warbonnet bridge across the San Ysidro and turning up the curving bluff road toward the Sebastian ranch.

Scant moments after the sound of hoofs on the reverberating planks of the bridge reached the Slash S, Kent Sebastian appeared on his front gallery, with a big Mexican *vaquero* and another man, apparently his foreman. Sebastian grunted an order to the Mexican, who ducked indoors and returned with an old-fashioned brass telescope. Sebastian leaned against a porch post and trained the glass on the oncoming rider.

"It's Crowfant!" the Masked Rider heard Sebastian's startled voice exclaim. "I thought he aimed to pull out of the Alligash badlands and head for Chihuahua as soon as he got paid off!"

CHAPTER VIII

Doak Crowfant

THE Masked Rider shifted position tensely. A showdown was in store for Kent Sebastian and the results of his meeting with the Alligash badman should be interesting to watch.

Sebastian strolled out to the front gate, close enough to the Masked Rider's position in the bordering cactus hedge for him to see the puzzled frown gathering on the rancher's brow. The foreman and the big Mexican seated themselves in wicker rockers on the porch. They would cover Sebastian in case of trouble.

The Masked Rider turned his attention back to the roadway. Doak Crowfant was riding a deep-chested strawberry roan which the black-clad man recognized as one of the horses that had been ridden by one of the gang which had halted the eastbound sheep train over on the Piñon Peak grade.

As the rider drew closer to the Slash S, the masked man had a clear view of the outlaw. He was a pot-bellied individual in his early fifties of otherwise nondescript appearance. He wore a flop-brimmed Stetson with a leather band, a sweat-stained hickory shirt under a plucked beaver vest, apron-length chaps and star boots. Revolvers in half-breed holsters were slung at his flanks for cross-draw. Just another saddle bum.

Pulling up in front of the gate where Kent Sebastian stood waiting, Doak Crowfant lifted an arm in greeting, hooking one leg over his swellfork pommel. Reaching in his shirt pocket he pulled out tobacco sack and papers. His malevolent face wrinkled in a snag-toothed grin.

"Well, Boss—satisfied with our little derailin' job?"

Sebastian nodded, a frown still carving its notch between his thick black brows.

"Sure. Drumheller will lose the Box M now. It cost me a pretty penny, Crowfant, but those water rights will be worth it to me."

Crowfant shook tobacco into a thin husk, rolled it with stubby fingers, and cemented the cigarette with a swipe of his tongue.

"That's what I'm here for," he remarked after he had fired his cigarette. "Glad you're satisfied, Kent."

Sebastian opened the gate now, stepping out to stare up at the outlaw.

"You're here—for what?" he demanded warily.

Crowfant's lips pursed out as he blew a smoke ring into the sultry, motionless air. He extended a grimy hand, rubbing thumb and forefinger together.

"What in hell do you think I'm here for —to pass the time a day?" he asked good-humoredly. "Give, *amigo*. The ol' mazuma. The *dinero*. Fifty thousand dollars, *oro*. The pay-off."

The Masked Rider felt a rime of cool sweat break out on his cheeks. He fingered a gun butt, cursing the fact that he could not emerge from hiding and throw his Colts on this scheming pair. But that would be impossible, with two of Sebastian's gunhawks sitting on the front porch, watching.

"Crowfant," Sebastian said after a long pause, "I know you're a crook and a killer. But I didn't think you'd try to extort double pay from me. What do you take me for?"

Now it was Crowfant's turn to be puzzled.

"I agreed to keep Drumheller's sheep from reachin' the Mesa. You said yourself I done a good job. All right. Fifty thousand was the price. Fork over."

Sebastian's face reddened angrily.

"Damn you, I sent you your money, and—" Sebastian broke off. He stepped closer to Crowfant's stirrup. "Didn't your man deliver that package of greenbacks to you last night, Doak? The one who wound up in Housel's jail with the Indian?"

Crowfant stared back at the rancher. "What are you talkin' about?"

Sebastian groaned. "I've been double-crossed," he snarled. "You told me you had the loyalty of all your crew, Doak. Weren't two of your gang captured at Rosario Canyon?"

Crowfant shook his head. "All six of us made a clean getaway. The only Injun I got with my bunch is Walking Crow, my cook, and he wasn't on that train-wreckin' job."

SEBASTIAN rubbed his clean-shaven jaw thoughtfully for a moment. Then, without warning, he snapped a long-barreled six-gun from an armpit holster and

[*Turn page*]

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and ... Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."

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put a point-blank drop on Crowfant.

"You're lying, Doak!" he snarled. "I've got the word of Sheriff Housel and two railroad dicks that two of your boys were captured. Last night I turned over fifty thousand in cash to the white man and sent him on the way. If he decided to vamose with your money, that's your hard luck, not mine. Now get off this ranch."

For a moment, the Masked Rider believed that Doak Crowfant was going to attempt a sneak draw, even in the face of Sebastian's gun drop. Then he relaxed, picked up his reins, and wheeled his horse away.

Over his shoulder he said bleakly, "You hold the aces now, Sebastian. If you're smart you'll shoot me now, while you can. It's you that's lyin', tryin' to euchre me out of our pay-off. It's what I deserve, trustin' a liar like you!"

Sebastian said in a trembling voice, "I want no quarrel with you, Crowfant. If I shot you, your men would bushwhack me inside of a week. Go back to your camp. Your man will probably be there with your *dinero* when you get there."

Crowfant shook his head. "I tell you, none of my men got caught at Piñon Peak. If you ain't lyin', then you give my money to somebody who put it over on you!"

Sebastian holstered his gun. "I'm not lyin', Doak."

Crowfant grinned bitterly. "In that case, I'll give you until midnight tonight to dig up another fifty thousand pesos, *amigo*. And when I get back for it I'll have my boys with me. If you ain't got the cash by midnight, we'll burn the Slash S to the ground and wipe out you and anybody else who tries to stop us!"

As Crowfant clapped spurs to the roan's barrel and cantered away from the Slash S in a boil of yellow dust, the Masked Rider saw Sebastian whip the six-gun from holster again and draw down on the rider. But the range was too great for a belt gun, and Sebastian decided against risking a back-shot at the departing outlaw.

Instead, the big rancher turned on his heel and hurried back to the house. The Mexican and foreman followed him inside, obviously for a council of war.

"Each one thinks the other is double-crossing him," the Masked Rider chuckled. "Looks like I've got my work cut out for me. Wait here for that midnight showdown—"

And then another idea came, completely altering the complexion of things. Crowfant was on his way back to his robbers' roost somewhere in the Alligash badlands beyond Owlhorn Mesa. With any luck at all, the Masked Rider believed he could track Doak Crowfant to his lair, and do something no lawman had ever succeeded in doing—locate Crowfant's secret hideout.

Then, an anonymous message planted in Sheriff Mort Housel's jail office would result in a heavy posse riding out to the Alligash rattler's nest. If Housel played his cards right, if he enlisted the help of Sheriff Paulson's big posse from Flagstaff, he should be able to overwhelm Crowfant's gang and make a mass capture of the outlaws who had wrecked Drumheller's sheep train and killed innocent men in accomplishing it.

All things considered, such a scheme seemed preferable to waiting here for tonight's clash between Sebastian and Crowfant. Sebastian would do everything he could to prevent a pitched battle from occurring on his own doorstep, with its inevitable bloodshed. It was not unlikely that Sebastian would pay Crowfant another fifty thousand dollars to avoid such a calamity.

WRIGGLING out of the cactus hedge, the Masked Rider crawled over the lip of the bluff and hurriedly retraced his steps to the river bank cottonwood bosque where he had concealed Midnight. He ran little risk of detection, riding away from Slash S. By following the river he could keep under the cottonwoods and willows as far as the Warbonnet bridge.

Keeping the big black at a steady lope, the Masked Rider reached the long wooden bridge simultaneously with Crowfant's

crossing. On the south bank, Crowfant reined his roan down into the shallow gulch of the river and, as the masked man watched from behind a clump of salt cedars, spurred his horse into the gravelly-bedded stream and vanished out of sight around a bend of the San Ysidro.

"Making sure he won't leave a trail back to the badlands," the black-clad rider muttered. "Well, that's *muy bueno*. Keeping Crowfant in sight on the open prairie would have been tough to handle."

The Masked Rider put his black into the sluggish current of the San Ysidro, forded under the wooden bridge and gained the smooth sandy shelf under the south cutbank.

When he cleared the next bend, he got a glimpse of Crowfant rounding the next turn of the river. The only risk involved now was in letting Crowfant catch sight of him. If the outlaw thought he was being followed, he would immediately fort up for an ambush.

Crowfant was riding at a leisurely pace. The pursuing masked man held his own mount to a similar gait. If the outlaw left the river gulch at any point, his tracks in the mud would be easily located.

For the next three hours, the Masked Rider used every artifice of the manhunting business to keep Crowfant from increasing his lead, yet keep himself from being seen. At one point, he left the San Ysidro by a side arroyo and took to the open sage flats, keeping Midnight at a gallop for three miles until he intersected the snakelike course of the river again.

Here, giving Midnight a chance for a breather, he concealed himself on the cutbank. After a twenty-minute wait, he saw Doak Crowfant coming upstream, his strawberry roan splashing through hock-deep water.

Satisfied that the outlaw intended to follow the river all the way to the break in Owlhorn Mesa's western wall, where the river entered Rosario Canyon at the base of Piñon Peak, the Masked Rider once more took to the open range. Crowfant could not leave the river without detection.

Despite the fact that he made a conspicuous figure in his black mask and cape and Stetson, the Masked Rider felt safe. Only once did he see anyone on the prairie. That was a spring-bed wagon drawn by two mules, heading toward Warbonnet on the road from Jerry Kellogg's place.

The wagon was over a mile away, so the Masked Rider could not see if the driver was Kellogg or one of the Mallorys. By the same token, he was safe from recognition at that distance.

CHAPTER IX

Captured

WHEN the Masked Rider reached the jungle of mesquite, the westering sun was putting its hot strike in his eyes. The thorny jungle made a deep, unbroken gray-green sea to the footslopes of towering scar-sided Piñon Peak.

This chaparral meant the end of keeping ahead of Crowfant. At any point along the river's course where it entered the *brasada* country, the outlaw could quit the river and head into the Alligash badlands. Side trails were numerous here.

The Masked Rider felt certain that Crowfant's lair could not be far from Piñon Peak. Otherwise the outlaw would not be able to assemble his riders and be back at the Slash S by midnight tonight.

Accordingly, the Masked Rider reined up where the river entered the low canyon—the beginnings of the Rosario gorge—at the edge of the chaparral jungle.

It was past mid-afternoon. Crowfant still had four or five hours of daylight. Assuming that he had left his hideout at dawn in order to reach Kent Sebastian's ranch at noon, he should make it back to his hideout while daylight still held. That was good.

Concealed behind a leafy wall of thorny junco, the Masked Rider saw Doak Crowfant come in view around a river bend.

traveling a well-beaten cow trail along the south bank now. Moments later Crowfant passed directly under the Masked Rider's position, close enough for his trailer to hear the gurgle of whiskey down Crowfant's throat as the outlaw braced himself with a shot from his pocket bottle.

Flanking the river, the masked man threaded his way through the *brasada*. He came upon one of the game trails which made a webwork of the chaparral, and pulled Midnight back into the brush as he heard the snorting of a horse approaching along that trail from the San Ysidro.

It was Crowfant. The outlaw passed within a dozen feet of the watching man, head slumped on his chest, asleep.

His stumbling roan, then, knew what trails to follow to reach the Alligash badlands. The Masked Rider curbed an impulse to ride out into the trail and put a gun on Crowfant. For capturing the ringleader of the train wrecking gang was not his objective. He wanted to enable Sheriff Housel to make a clean sweep of Crowfant's owlhoots.

The trailing job should be simple and safe, now. The trails were sandy, the tracks of Crowfant's roan easy to follow. And, from recent experience, the Masked Rider knew that all the trails in this brush were shifting blow sand.

He waited five minutes, to give Crowfant a comfortable lead. Then he rode out into the trail and began reading sign, keeping Midnight at a steady walk.

They came to a three-way fork. The tracks of Crowfant's pony led southwest on the right-hand fork. That added up. Piñon Peak and Rosario Canyon lay in that direction.

The trail looped up a rise and the chaparral opened up to expose one of the many bald knobs of high ground which reared out of the sea of mesquite like islands. Dust clung to the air atop this ridge, so Crowfant had ridden over the summit.

Midway up the slope, the black-masked man-hunter suddenly winced to the air-whip of a bullet missing his head by inches. As he reined up, thinking that Crowfant was ambushing him, the crash of a Winchester sounded from a different direction—the southeast.

"It's him, boys!" a strident shout sent echoes volleying through the wasteland brush. "The Masked Rider!"

He whipped around in saddle. Coming along the crest of the bald ridge not a hundred yards away a group of five riders was hammering toward him at a gallop, smoke spewing from lifted rifles, sunlight flashing on tin stars pinned to each shirt.

LEADING that onrushing cavalcade was the humped-over shape of Sheriff Mort Housel! Out scouring the malpais in search of his two escaped prisoners, Housel had stumbled across a far richer prize—the Masked Rider himself.

With a groan of anger, the Robin Hood outlaw wheeled his black stallion and rocketed toward the sheltering mesquites. Gone now was any chance of trailing Doak Crowfant to his lair. With .30-30 missiles sleeting around him, he had less than a fifty-fifty chance of living to reach the *brasada's* protection.

The foot of the bald slope was almost at hand when a slug smashed the Masked Rider's left forearm near the shoulder. The impact of it was like a giant hand, clubbing him from saddle. His hurtling shape crashed soddenly into a cushioning bank of dwarf juniper. Blood was a warm, viscid sensation inside his sleeve. The taste of death itself corroded his mouth as he hit the flinty ground on all fours.

Clawing an ebony-stocked .45 from leather, he twisted around to face the overwhelming odds swooping down the hillside above him, possemen closing in for the kill.

His left arm felt paralyzed. Nausea swirled in his belly, the aftermath of bullet shock, and it took all his strength to lift his gun and thumb a shot which sprayed rubble against the forelegs of Mort Housel's oncoming pony.

Incredibly, that single shot, intentionally aimed low, brought the Warbonnet posse pounding to a halt. Deputies flung themselves from saddles to keep from being skylined targets for the mystery man's

guns. The sheer power of the Masked Rider's reputation as a master gunman had cowed these riders, caught in the open.

Back in the brush, Midnight had crashed to a skidding halt and was coming back to his rider's assistance. The black-clad man's brain spun sickeningly as he dragged himself snakelike away from the flimsy shelter of the juniper which, by breaking his fall, had saved him from being knocked out or killed.

He could easily have downed one or more of the posse riders. Sheriff Housel had been squarely in the middle of his gunsights, a plain target at fifty yards' range, silhouetted against the brassy skyline. But the Masked Rider's trigger had been stayed by the ironclad code of ethics which he had long ago imposed upon himself—never to shoot down an officer of the law engaged in his rightful business.

With the agony of his bullet-drilled forearm lacing his entire nervous system with white heat, the Masked Rider stumbled to his feet as he saw Midnight looming before him. Dimly above the tom-tomming of his heart he could hear Mort Housel bawling orders to his men:

"He's either dead or knocked out, gents! Fan out and get to the brush. You wallopers can split the reward if you dab your loops on the Masked Rider!"

Somehow the wounded fugitive got a foot into stirrup, his six-gun holstered to free his right hand to grip the Brazos horn of the saddle. Midnight was spooky, fidgeting, but held still for the precious seconds necessary for the Masked Rider to pull himself astride. Random gunfire from the advancing posse riders clipped through the roundabout foliage. Housel's deputies were shooting to keep their own morale from breaking, as they scattered for the protection of the brush.

The Masked Rider gave Midnight his head. Thorns tore the fabric of his bannering black cape, clawed at his exposed flesh as he bent low over the saddle-horn. Then Midnight located a trail and broke into a gallop.

As his senses cleared, the Masked Rider got his black neck scarf untied, wadded up, and shoved under his shirt as a makeshift compress to stem the welling of blood from his wound. The bullet had punched through muscle and nerve tissue without shattering bone. He would carry an ugly scar to his grave, he knew, and he thought morosely, "That grave may be pretty close."

THROUGH the red fog of pain which obscured his vision, he was but vaguely aware of Midnight breaking into the open and crossing the cleared right-of-way of the railroad. Minutes later, the black stallion skidded down a cutbank into the gulch of the San Ysidro, splashed across the shallow stream, and plunged back into the brush north of the river.

Behind him the Masked Rider had left a fresh trail, all the clearer because of telltale splashes of blood. He knew Midnight was heading north, in the general direction of Jerry Kellogg's place. Unless

[*Turn page*]

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the pursuing possemen picked up his trail immediately, which was doubtful, he might make it to Kellogg's homestead and get his wound patched up.

When Midnight came to a halt to regain his wind, the Masked Rider ripped his bandanna into strips with his teeth and, working clumsily with his uninjured hand, succeeded in putting a crude bandage around his bullet-torn arm. It was a clean wound, he knew, a puncture caused by a cuprous-jacketed .30-30 slug. If a big leaden chunk from a .45 bore had clipped him it would have torn his arm half off.

As sundown approached it became increasingly darker in this *brasada*. The Masked Rider could hear the thud of hoofs and the exchanged shouts of Housel's posse riders, and despair touched him momentarily as he realized that the manhunters were already north of the river.

"They've picked up my trail," he muttered. "No chance to reach Kellogg's shack now. Couldn't—implicate—him and the Mallorys—befriending a man with a price—on his head."

Bullet shock sent waves of recurring pain through him. He kicked Midnight into motion, still giving the black stallion its head. One direction was as good as another, in this crazy maze of undergrowth.

He caught the glint of red sunlight off his right shoulder and realized that somehow Midnight had changed directions. He now was heading along a game trace toward the river, the railroad—and Housel's widely-deployed gunhawks.

They would shoot him on sight, rather than gamble on capturing him alive. Coupled to that disadvantage was the Masked Rider's self-imposed decision not to kill any of these lawmen. A desperado he might be in the opinion of many, but he had never taken the life of a legally constituted law enforcement officer. He never would.

The end came with devastating surprise. Midnight charged around an elbow bend of trail—and skidded on his haunches to keep from colliding with a big steeldust gelding which blocked the trail. Straddling the steeldust was Mort Housel, the Warbonnet sheriff. Housel was alone.

Housel grunted with surprise, then whipped up his carbine, the muzzle trained squarely at his target's midriff. At this close range, even the hastiest of shots couldn't miss.

"Elevate, Masked Rider!" the sheriff shouted. "I ain't the stripe to haul in a dead man if I can capture him alive!"

The man in black reined down his black, raised his right hand to hat-brim level.

"My left arm is crippled, Sheriff," he panted. "You winged me back there on the ridge."

Housel jumped out of saddle, hugging his Winchester under an armpit. He made no move to approach closer.

"I can see that by the blood I been trailin'," the star-packer acknowledged. "But I know your rep and I don't aim to be hoodwinked, Masked Rider. Slow and easy-like, lift your hoglegs out of leather and throw 'em my way. No booger moves!"

When the Masked Rider's matched revolvers lay in the dust at the sheriff's feet, Housel gestured with his carbine.

"Now peel off that mask. I want to have a look at that face of yours, Masked Rider."

The bayed rider for justice shook his head.

"Only one man living has seen me with my mask off, Sheriff. You'll have to—"

SOMETHING whizzed past the Masked Rider's left ear like a hornet. The steeple-peaked Stetson on the sheriff's head was sent kiting into the thorny branches of the junco tree beside which Housel was standing. The headgear caught in the brambles there, and the Masked Rider stifled a shout of exultation as he saw the flint-tipped Yaqui arrow which skewered Housel's sombrero crown.

The sheriff's rifle muzzle sagged as he stared aghast at the feather-tipped shaft which carried some of his own hair tangled on the barbed arrowhead. Before he could recover from that shock, a soft voice challenged him from the shadow-clotted mesquites on the far side of the Masked

Rider's horse:

"Drop the rifle, Senor Sheriff."

The Masked Rider swung down from saddle and leaped to pick up one of his six-guns when Housel dropped his Winchester as if it were a red-hot branding iron. The sheriff was staring off past the masked man.

"Come on out, Hawk!" the black-clad man said in a low voice.

The tangled mesquite brush parted then and out into the trail came the tall Blue Hawk. Not until now did the Masked Rider realize where he was. Their camping place was less than fifty feet from this spot!

A groan escaped Housel's lips. His face was ashen. He was ignoring the six-gun with which the Masked Rider covered him. His eyes were glued with a fatalistic mesmerism on the yew-wood hunting bow the Indian held. Nocked to the string of that primitive weapon was another arrow similar to the one which had impaled his Stetson.

"Relax, Sheriff!" the Masked Rider said gently. "As long as you don't holler to attract the attention of your possemen, you are safe with us."

Blue Hawk spoke swiftly in the Yaqui tongue, which he had long since taught his partner of the danger trails:

"Shall I tie up the sheriff, Senor?"

The Masked Rider said in English, for Housel's benefit:

"No, Hawk. If the sheriff is the kind of man I think he is, he'll be interested in taking a little pasear with us tonight. Over to Kent Sebastian's ranch. Sheriff, if you play your cards right, by midnight you will have your chance to get out from under Sebastian's domination of you and this cattle land—and in addition, capture the outlaw gang that derailed Drumheller's sheep train. Are you interested?"

The sheriff roused out of his stupefied revery to meet the direct strike of the eyes behind the domino mask.

"I'm interested," he said. "What's your proposition?"

The Masked Rider holstered his gun. "I'll explain," he said cryptically, "on our way over to the Slash S. But first we will visit my Indian *compañero's* camp while I get this arm wound dressed."

CHAPTER X

Showdown at the Slash S

IT WAS pitch dark inside the cactus and juniper hedge which bordered Kent Sebastian's ranchhouse yard. But a highwheeling silver-dollar full moon put the details of the Slash S ranch into bold relief, and turned the Warbonnet wagon road snaking off down the bluff into a ribbon of silver.

Three men hunkered down in the chaparral hedge, watching the slow approach of six riders coming up the bluff road. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, with Sheriff Mort Housel between them. It was indicative of their mutual trust that the Warbonnet sheriff now carried his loaded Winchester.

"That'll be Doak Crowfant and the men who derailed that train at your 'Deadline for Sheep' sign, Sheriff," the Masked Rider whispered. "For all I know, Sebastian may be waiting with his crew, primed to slaughter those buscaderos. Time will tell if Crowfant is moving into a gun trap here."

The sheriff grunted. "If the yarn you spun comin' over is even half true, *amigo*, I won't care if the two factions wipe each other out. I won't get my self-respect back until Kent Sebastian's grip on this range is smashed for keeps."

Just out of rifle range, Crowfant and his riders halted. Then across the moonlit distance came the Alligash outlaw's hoarse shout:

"Halloo, the house! I'm comin' in, Sebastian. Any doublecross tricks and my *compañeros* will see you in Boot Hill!"

A dark shape detached itself from the blackness of the ranchhouse porch. It was Kent Sebastian, walking out through the moonlight to open the front gate.

"My crew is asleep in the bunkhouse,

Crowfant. Come on up."

The Masked Rider and his waiting companions held their breaths with suspense as they saw Crowfant ride away from his men and approach the Slash S grounds at a singlefoot jog. They had to admire the outlaw's nerve. For all Crowfant knew, a blizzard of bullets might cut him down when he got inside easy rifle range of the darkened ranchhouse.

Sebastian stood waiting as his owlhoot accomplice came up, moon rays glinting from the blued steel of a rifle balanced across his swellfork pommel. As he rode in, Crowfant swung the Winchester to cover the Slash S cattle king.

"I've got a duplicate fifty thousand for you, Crowfant," Sebastian said, when the outlaw reined up. "But I still stick to my original story. I handed your pay-off to that hombre Sheriff Housel had in his jail at Warbonnet the other night."

The Masked Rider heard Housel suck a breath across his teeth. Sebastian had already damned himself for a criminal with his own words. Words which confirmed to the letter the story the Masked Rider had given Housel concerning Wayne Morgan's kidnaping at the hands of the sheep rancher, Drumheller, and how Sebastian, after saving Morgan from a lynch rope, had put Crowfant's fifty-thousand-dollar package into his hands.

"You were a fool, then," Crowfant said.

Sebastian shrugged. "I know it. But you had told me you had the loyalty of all your men. Like I told you, Housel and a couple of railroad detectives claimed that hombre and his Injun pardner were members of your gang."

Crowfant hipped around in saddle and raised an arm in a signal to his waiting men, down the road. The Masked Rider nudged the sheriff's shoulder as they saw the Alligash badlands bunch come cantering on in to join their leader.

Blue Hawk, carrying a .45-70 Springfield instead of his bow and quiver of arrows, wriggled silently away through the brush, startling the sheriff.

"Hawk's going to box in Crowfant's bunch from the rear," the Masked Rider whispered to the lawman. "When the showdown breaks the Indian will have cut off Crowfant's getaway trail."

SUSPENSE laid its cutting edge on the two men crouching under the cactus brambles. They sensed treachery in Sebastian's abject surrender to Crowfant. Sebastian might be the bait to draw the Alligash bunch into a death trap.

Not until his five rock-jawed owlhoots were beside him did Crowfant boot his saddle-gun and dismount. He strode up to Sebastian, still standing by the gate, and said harshly:

"Let's see the color of your *dinero*, Kent."

Sebastian reached under his coat and drew out a canvas sack, which jingled metallically as he handed it to Crowfant.

"Gold and silver and currency, Doak. All the money I could scrape up. I paid a heavy price to keep the Mesa from being sheeped out."

Crowfant hefted the bag. Then he said suspiciously, "I'll have a look at it, Kent. I'll even count it. Because this time tomorrow we'll be long gone toward the Mex border."

Crowfant reached into the canvas bag, bent to look at the metal disks in the cup of his palm.

"Washers!" bellowed the outlaw. "Iron washers! You doublecrossin' pig—"

As if Crowfant's shout was a signal, red hell broke loose from the windows of the Slash S ranchhouse. The night shuddered to the roar of fast-triggered guns, as Sebastian's cohorts opened fire from their concealed positions.

In the space of an eye wink, three of the five saddles of Crowfant's crew were emptied, riders bullet-dumped out of stirrups. Crowfant owed his life to the fact that he was shielded by Kent Sebastian.

With a choked oath, Doak Crowfant drove a fist at Sebastian's jaw, dropping the big rancher. Then, half hidden by the churning dust kicked up by the bolting horses of his men, Crowfant vaulted into the saddle of the nearest pony. Raking horseflesh with Mexican rowels, he headed

off along the road at a gallop.

His remaining two men reined about, triggering six-guns blindly toward the unseen gunmen in the ranchhouse. Then they were knocked out of the fight, caught in a converging hail of lead.

Fifty yards down the road, Doak Crowfant was drawing out of gun range when he saw a dusky figure vault from the roadside brush and seize his bridle rings. The horse went down. As Crowfant was thrown clear of the saddle he had a brief glimpse of his attacker—a copper-skinned Indian with a lone eagle feather jutting from his scalp lock.

The Masked Rider leaped to his feet and sprang from his hiding place, unseen behind swirling dust clouds by Sebastian's killers in the ranchhouse. Plunging blindly through the murk, he caught sight of Kent Sebastian climbing to his feet by the gate.

Sebastian grunted with shocked bewilderment as he found the gun in his hand jerked from his fingers by a tall, black-masked apparition out of nowhere. Then a hand seized his arm and the Masked Rider's voice rasped close to his ear:

"You're coming with us, Sebastian. To Sheriff Housel's jail. You're finished in Owlhorn Mesa."

With a berserk oath, Sebastian jabbed a hand under his fustian coat. Moonlight filtering through the dense swim of dust revealed the .41 derringer gripped in the rancher's fist.

It was kill or be killed; the issue was out of the Masked Rider's control. In the clock-tick of time remaining before Sebastian could squeeze trigger of the hide-out gun, the mystery rider fell back and tripped gunhammer.

Bore flame singed Sebastian's vest as the .45 bullet took him in the ribs, plowed through his heart and lodged in his spine. The man who had plotted to dominate Owlhorn Mesa's cattle industry was toppling dead into the dust as the Masked Rider turned and dived back into the cactus hedge where Sheriff Mort Housel had been a paralyzed witness of this last minute's violent events.

"Come on down to the river, Sheriff!" the Masked Rider grated. "We can't buck Sebastian's crew. By daylight they'll have cleared out for good, anyhow, with their boss killed."

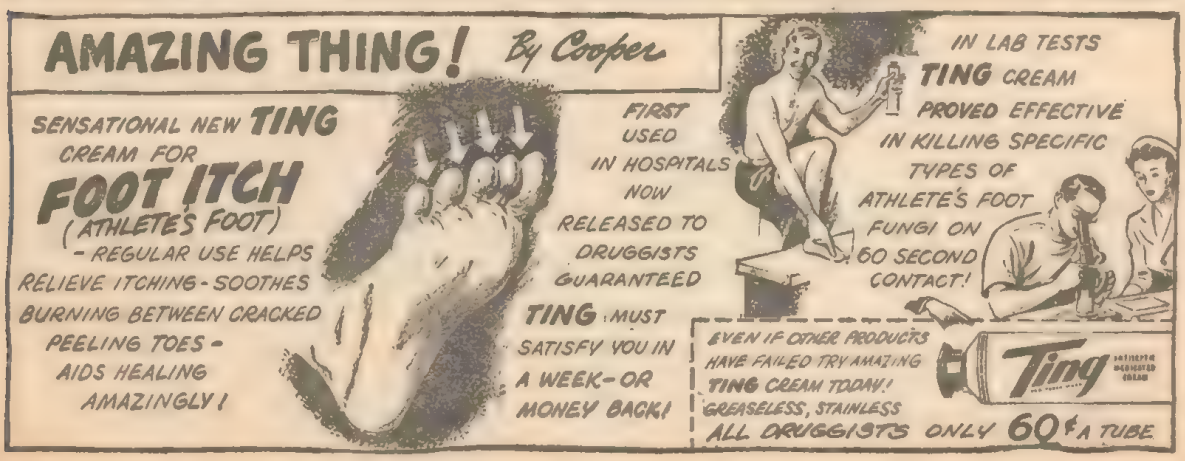
THREE minutes later Housel and the Robin Hood outlaw came to a skidding halt at the foot of the bluff, where they had picketed their horses. Waiting for them there was Blue Hawk. Jackknifed over the cantle of the sheriff's steel-dust pony was the limp figure of Doak Crowfant, chief of the elusive Alligash badlands owlhoot riders. Blood seeped from a gash on Crowfant's head.

"Not dead—asleep," the Yaqui said. "You have at least one man for the Warbonnet gallows, Senor Sheriff."

The Masked Rider was mounting Midnight. At his side, Blue Hawk was already astraddle his pony.

"About that fifty thousand that this

[Turn page]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Wayne Morgan hombre got from Sebastian," the sheriff said dazedly. "Where—"

The Masked Rider laughed softly as he wheeled his magnificent black stallion around.

"You will never see Morgan or that money again, Sheriff," he called back, touching Midnight with steel. "But the *dinero* will be put to good purpose, I assure you—and right here in Owlhorn County."

Before Housel could call out, the two riders of the danger trails had vanished in the cottonwood brake, headed downstream along the San Ysidro River. The sheriff never caught sight of them again, and for that he was sorry. He owed them a debt of thanks for ridding his county of Sebastian's malevolent tyranny. This range would be eternally indebted to the Robin Hood of the West.

It was weeks later and miles removed from Owlhorn Mesa when the Masked Rider learned the sequel of their bloody interlude in the Warbonnet region.

As Wayne Morgan, he had dropped into a barber shop in Lordsburg, New Mexico, for a much-needed haircut. While waiting his turn, he chanced upon a recent issue of the *Cattlemen's Journal,* a publication devoted to rangeland news of the Western frontier.

A news story datelined Warbonnet, Arizona Territory, caught his eye. It was of sufficient interest for him to tear out and keep to show his Yaqui partner, waiting for him at a secret camp some miles away.

WARBONNET, ARIZ., AUG. 15—Spencer Mallory, veteran Arizona rancher, was high bidder at sheriff's auction for the Box M cattle ranch south of here this week. The previous owner, sheepman Rubio Drumheller, is now serving time at Yuma penitentiary for assaulting Sheriff Morton Housel recently and enabling a prisoner to escape jail, one Wayne Morgan.

The Box M was hammered down for the low bid of $7,200, there being no other bidders. Mallory informs the *Journal* that he plans to retire and turn the running of his spread over to his daughter, Pamela, and her new husband, Gerald Kellogg, local boy.

Next month the extensive ranch holdings of the late Kent Sebastian will go on the block. See next month's *Journal* for details as to the new ownership of the Slash S spread.

Coming up next issue

THE TELEGRAPH TRAIL

A new adventure of Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk, as they save a child's life—and tangle with the West's wiliest killer!

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

★

WAR KNIFE

A frank novelet about a tough sixteen-year-old who wanted to be treated like a man—and have a man's rights

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ONE MORE BLIZZARD

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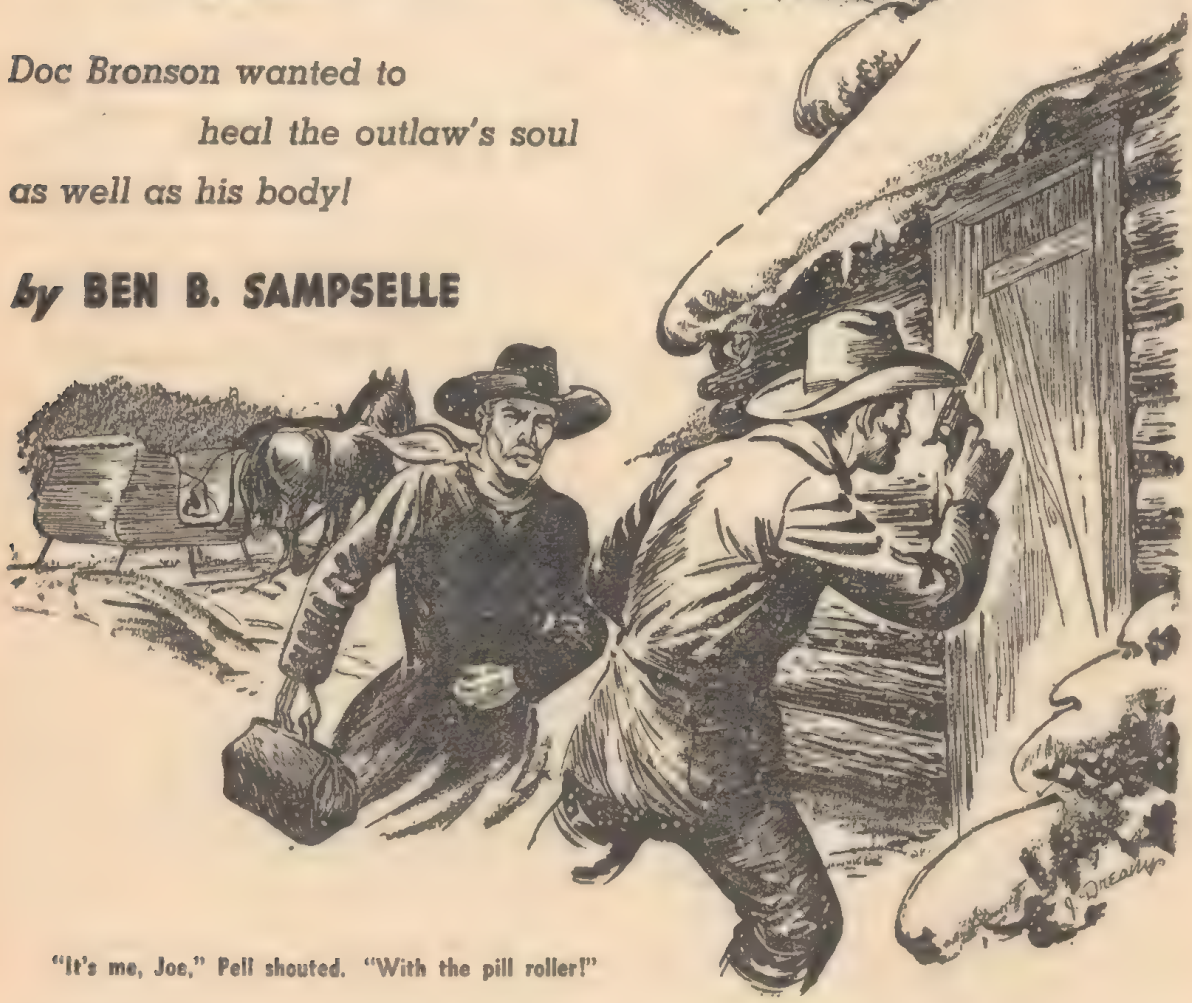

"It's me, Joe," Pell shouted. "With the pill roller!"

THE RED vein in the thermometer by the doorway of Lock's general store had slid past zero at eleven o'clock that morning, and a half-hour later was still shrinking. The swirling, wind-driven pellets of falling snow lashed like buckshot against the windows, plastering them with an icy opaque curtain.

Inside the store, close to the glowing bowl of the pot-bellied stove, two men were hunched over a checkerboard, a third man watching the play, when the door was flung open. Doc Bronson glanced up, while Bill Worth, the liveryman, shouted against the sudden gust of snow-filled wind that came in.

"Shut the door, if both your arms ain't broke!"

"It's the sheriff," Doc said. "And he's empty-handed. I guess Joe Hallaran and Rafe Pell didn't head this way after all."

Tom Tragger, the sheriff, a tall, spare man, came on toward the stove, rubbing his ears, as did the four men who followed him.

"We didn't see hair nor hide of 'em, Doc," Tragger said, answering the cow-town doctor's unspoken question. "We combed every likely spot this side of the Owlhorns. Anyhow, we're only guessin' they come this way after makin' their break from the Territorial Prison."

Doc shrugged his bony shoulders. "I was mighty sorry to hear Joe had done it. He had less than six months of his four year term to do yet. Joe could have come back to the valley. Folks would have forgotten he'd tried to rob the bank, being the young sprout he was."

Tragger wiped the icicles from his mustache and said, "Rafe Pell's the gent to blame for both occasions. He's an old hand at lawbreakin'. The sashay at the bank was Joe's first time to go hog wild."

Doc lost all interest in the checker game and pushed the board onto Worth's knees. "Put it away, Bill. We'll finish the game tomorrow."

"All right, Doc. You're just postponin' your beatin'."

"I was thinking," Doc said, ignoring Bill's mild taunt, "just such a blizzard as this was howling down the valley the day I went out to Mike Hallaran's place to bring Joe into the world. Twenty years ago. Old Phoebe Whistler, God bless her, who midwifed around that section, couldn't help Joe's ma. Joe had to be turned around before—"

"I reckon Joe switched right back the wrong way after bein' born," Bill Worth said. "His bein' turned hindside to must've been a sign of some kind."

DOC shook his balding gray head. "I wouldn't put all the blame on Joe. Mike Hallaran was a hard man. If you remember, Mike was narrow between the eyes, and two hundred pounds of hard bone and muscle that never softened this side of his grave. Mike treated the boy more like one of his mules than a son."

"I recollect, too," Sheriff Tragger said, as he peeled off his overcoat, "that it was in such kind of weather you pulled Joe through a bad case of pneumonia."

"I think the valley would have been a damn sight better off, Doc," Bill Worth said, as he came back to his chair from laying away the checker board, "if you'd spared yourself both trips."

"I can't say you're right, Bill," Doc protested, "because I don't know what's in the book for Joe. I do the best I can to mend the bodies that the Lord gave the people in the valley, from there on it's up to Him."

"Look, Doc," Bill put in, wagging a finger at the old medico, "how'd you feel about Joe if he did come this way and—well, say he grabbed your sleigh for travel and left you afoot a dozen miles from nowhere in this blizzard? You'd never make it walkin'."

Doc's weathered face creased thoughtfully. "I'd pray to be told what to do. There's a good spark in every man if you can find a way to get at it."

"Rafe Pell?" Bill jeered lightly.

Doc nodded. While talking he had unconsciously pulled a wrinkled buckeye from his pocket. The sheriff saw it and chuckled.

"Doc, you're a great believer; faith in people, faith in your pills and powders, and faith in that old horse chestnut you carry in your pocket to keep off rheumatism."

Doc grinned. "A lot of men carry buckeyes for that very same reason, Sheriff."

He let it go at that. It was a great deal easier than explaining that Jessie, his wife, had picked up two of them from under the tree where they were sitting the night he had proposed to her. She had put one in each of his hands. He smiled to himself remembering how those two buckeyes had got in his way when he reached out to gather Jessie in his arms. But swiftly he had dropped one of them into his pocket, for no particular reason that he could remember, and the other on the ground.

The old buckeye had supplied many a chuckle for Jessie and himself through the years.

Rising to his feet, Doc glanced at his big silver watch. It was nearly noon. Jessie would have dinner ready.

"Doc, I've been holdin' back on a bad piece of news," the sheriff said, a rueful smile on his lips. "We come by Ezra Huffman's place. Ezra's poorly again."

Shrugging into his overcoat, Doc said, "My listening to Ezra's woes for a half-hour and a dose of calomel will do wonders for him."

"Never saw it fail," Bill Worth said. "That old goat waits for a foul piece of weather to come along, then hollers like forty for Doc."

Doc Bronson had scarcely reached the straggling edge of town in his cutter when a rider caught up with him. Through the whirling curtain of snow he had seen the man leave the shelter of a spruce across the road as he pulled out his own driveway, but had paid him no heed. He paid him little now except to think that he was probably a rider from the Three Star spread, who had come into town on some urgent errand.

"Hold it, Doc!" the man shouted, and slid down stiffly from his horse.

BRONSON pulled his big-boned sorrel to a halt while the rider came around the head of his horse, his hat low over his eyes to keep the wind from sweeping it off, his chin shoved low into the upturned collar of his overcoat. He had thrust his left arm through the bridle reins of his horse.

"Move over, Doc," the man ordered. "We're goin' to ride a piece together." He put out his left hand to jerk aside the robes.

"Careful," Doc warned, "I've got a lighted lantern on the floor."

He saw the man's lips were purple with cold, and he had little color in his face except where the stinging pellets of snow beat against his cheek-bones. A twisted smile curved the man's lips when he was settled and the robes around him.

He said, "Drive on, Doc. I got a little job for you. You don't seem to know me."

Doc flapped the lines over the back of the sorrel and put his glance on the man's face. There was a hard, cynical set to his passenger's mouth and a shiftiness in his streaky eyes, but they gave no warning to the doctor.

Doc felt a round object press forcefully against his ribs, and the passenger said, "I'm Rafe Pell. Give the sorrel the whip. We're goin' up to the Three Star line cabin in the Owlhorns."

A cold knot gathered in Doc's stomach. He didn't like any part of this. "I don't know that we can make it in this sleigh. What's up there? What's the hurry?"

"We'll make it," Pell rasped above the noise of the wind, shoving the gun hard against the doctor's ribs. "Joe Hallaran's up there, a bullet-hole in his arm."

"What makes you think I'll do anything for him?" Doc asked stoutly.

"This gun. Don't get any fool notion that I won't use it. Don't stop if we meet anybody."

Doc drove on. There was nothing else for him to do. The icy, biting wind grew stronger, needling their faces, chilling them to the bone. Sometimes on a swell of ground the wind seemed to come from all sides, and there was no way they could turn to shelter their faces. Now and then the sorrel stopped against the white, blinding wall, his tail whipped straight out behind him, as if unsure of his direction, and Doc would urge him on again,

They had traveled a long time when Doc became conscious that the trail pitched steadily upward. They had reached the foothills of the Owlhorns. Presently, the white pounding wall thinned a little and the wind tore at them with less violence.

At last they came to the timbered ridges rising out of the swirling mist in towering white masses. Snow lay sheeted under the trees, and there were spots where the wind had whipped it clean, piling into deep drifts through which the sorrel pulled the floundering cutter.

In the shelter of a straight-sided ravine

the sorrel stopped and Doc let him stand to blow.

"What's this for?" Pell asked, eyeing the medico suspiciously.

"Old Red's got to have a couple of minutes rest," Doc said. "He's about tuckered."

Hardly a minute had passed when the fugitive said, "Get him goin'. The next time he stops I'll put a match under his tail. That'll liven him up."

Doc scarcely heard Pell as he gazed at the ridge beyond the mouth of the ravine, where the branches of giant firs and spruce bent gracefully under their weight of snow—a thousand Christmas trees already trimmed. He wished Jessie could see them. Jessie wouldn't start worrying about him until suppertime. He'd have Joe Hallaran's arm fixed by then.

HE FELT a chill run along his spine that hadn't come from the blizzard. He clucked to the sorrel.

"What do you expect to get out of this?" he asked. "I mean out of your escape from—"

"We're out from behind them stone walls, ain't we?" Pell grated.

"They'll catch you—put you back again."

"Like hell they will! Catchin' comes 'fore stretchin'. I got plans. We wouldn't have come here if Joe hadn't got a slug in his arm when we was robbin' a store for clothes. I'm as smart as any dumb-cluck sheriff. I got us a couple horses, clothes and guns. I ain't so dumb."

As they climbed higher and higher along the twisting switchbacks, Pell boasted about his plans.

"I was sharp enough to get Joe out with me. I got a dress and bonnet for him." He laughed drily. "Cowtown banks will be easy to handle with a woman helper. We'll drive right out of the Territory in your cutter under the noses of the sheriffs, with Joe in his dress and bonnet."

Early twilight was dimming the leaden sky when they reached a cup-shaped valley high in the Owlhorns. Off to the right through the thick curtain of snow, Doc made out a log cabin in a grove of spruce, smoke curling up from its chimney until it reached the screeching wind above the rimrock, where it was swiftly torn to threads. Flanking the cabin was a horse corral and a brush-roofed shelter under which a hip-slacked horse stood.

"Drive over there," Pell ordered. "I don't want these plugs to get too stiff and cold to take us out of here."

A sinister quietness held on the floor of the valley, broken only by the occasional snuffle of the horses, but on the rimrock the wind whistled eerily through the trees, coming down like the muted wail of a wolf.

Doc climbed stiffly out of the sleigh. Pell got out on his side, dragging the lighted lantern with him. The fugitive didn't bother to tie the horses, evidently thinking that nothing would cause them to leave the shelter.

Doc got his bag from the sleigh and threw the robes over the seat, wondering why he did it. Pell had made it plain that it was himself and Joe Hallaran who expected to ride away from the line camp in the cutter.

Doc tramped along through the soft blanket of snow to the cabin, Pell behind him, the lantern in one hand, his gun in the other. The fugitive rapped on the slab door with the barrel of his gun.

"It's me, Joe," he shouted, "with the pill roller! Lift the bar, Doc, and get in."

Doc stepped into the cabin, pleasantly warm in sharp contrast to the frigid outside air. At the far side of the big room a bed of coals gleamed brightly in the semi-darkness. He heard Pell kick the door shut behind him, and come on to set the lantern on the rough deal table in the center of the room.

"You sure took your damn sweet time about gettin' the sawbones," a voice rasped from the side of the room.

That would be Joe Hallaran, Doc thought. The voice had a high, thin note of immaturity despite its gruffness.

"Boy, you don't know what a hell of a blizzard's blowin' in the valley," Pell growled, as he moved close to the doctor.

"Get off your coat and go to work, Doc. One funny move, I'll let a lot of daylight through your old carcass."

Doc's eyes, smarting from the stinging wind, focused slowly to the obscure light and glanced about. It was a typical line camp cabin; a cook-stove, a table, several benches, a cupboard, and a half-dozen wall-bunks. Joe lay on a bunk in a back corner.

WHILE Doc peeled off his coat, his glance settled on Joe's face. It was thin and had a sickly pallor as if sun and wind had never touched it. Doc recalled it easily, but there had been changes. Hard, cynical lines about the mouth had aged Joe's face out of all proportion to the years that had passed. His gray-green eyes stared back sullenly at the doctor.

Pell put a pot of water on the coals and added more wood to the fire, which blazed up brightly. Now, with Pell's hat tipped to the back of his head, Doc had the first good look at the fugitive's face. His mouth seemed little more than a gash in his blade-thin, sallow countenance. His shifty eyes were set close to his oversize nose, and were cold and stony as his glance cut to the medico.

"Hump yourself," he snarled. "What the hell you think I brought you up here for?"

Flexing the stiffness out of his numbed fingers, Doc turned to the man on the bunk—not a man, really, Doc thought, but a brash, overgrown boy. He unwrapped the bloody rag from Joe's upper left arm and felt gently around the gaping holes. Joe cursed and grabbed at the pistol that lay near his right hand. Pell stepped over and seized the weapon.

"None of that," he growled. "Not yet."

Doc sponged and irrigated the bullet-holes with warm water and carbolic acid, while Joe alternately clamped his jaws together rigidly and swore at the "butcher." All the while Doc was conscious of Rafe Pell's shadow hanging over him. It didn't add to the steadiness of his hands.

"He's lucky the slug didn't break his arm," Doc remarked, glancing up at Pell, "but it cut an artery. I can open his arm and tie it up, or we can try freezing it with snow."

"Which is the quickest?" Pell asked, his streaky eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Freezing it with snow, if it works," Doc said.

"I'll get a pan of it," Pell said, and handed Joe his pistol. "Keep your eye on the pill roller while I get the snow."

Pell went out, but came back in less than thirty seconds. Doc put a thickness of bandage over the bullet-holes and held a double handful of snow around the cloth.

"It's working," he said, a moment later. "I'll bandage it. You should aim to keep it cold until the artery can take care of itself."

Pell laughed, a short grating sound, without mirth.

"It'll stay cold enough when we start travelin'. Watch it till I come back." He canted his head at Joe, then at Doc. "You watch him, Joe. I've got to unharness that bag of bones and hitch in the horse that you rode up here last night."

Pell buttoned his coat and went out again, letting in a gust of snow-laden wind. Doc started winding the bandage on Joe's arm.

"What do you think such a life as this will bring you, Joe?" Doc asked, the moment Pell had closed the door.

"Plenty," Joe leered. "Rafe's got plans for us. He's sharper'n a razor."

"It's not in the cards, Joe," Doc said. "You'll be a hunted man, ducking from one hideout to another all your life—likely a short one. Maybe you'll rob a bank. What good will the money do you? You can't go anywhere openly and spend it."

"You're gutless, Doc," Joe jeered. He had been cagey enough to smell some purpose behind the medico's words. "You're talkin' to save your hide. You've lived plenty long enough. Stand up and take it like a man."

DOC shrugged his thin shoulders. "Just such a blizzard as this was blowing the day I drove out to your ma's place to bring you into the world," he

said, "and the same kind of weather when I pulled you through pneumonia."

"I don't want to hear any more of that weasel talk." Joe tilted the gun menacingly. "You got paid."

"As a matter of fact, Joe, I never got a copper for bringing you into the world, nothing except the thanks of your ma. But that was wiped off the books ten years ago. When your pa died I told your ma to forget the pneumonia bill. She's had tough sledding since then, with only your sixteen-year-old brother, Tim, to help her."

"You'll get paid," Joe snarled. "Or your widow will."

"Don't worry none about it, Joe," Doc said, as he tied the bandage. "My wife, Jessie, wouldn't want that kind of money. Neither would your ma."

Doc sat down wearily on the bench by the bunk.

"I'm just going to look for my pipe and tobacco," he said, and fished in the pockets of his coat that lay on the deal table at his elbow.

Joe watched him warily. When Doc had the pipe going, he pulled the old buckeye from a pocket of his pants and balanced it in his hand.

"Reckon I'll put it in the other pocket. The old pin's getting hot needles in it. The blizzard, I guess. Don't know what I'd do without the old buckeye for my rheumatics."

Joe glanced at Doc's hand through narrowed lids.

"That old horse chestnut might've come off the tree back of our house," he muttered.

A surge of elation ran through Doc's veins. Joe remembered the old tree with no other reminder of it, and he'd said, "our house."

"As a matter of fact, it did," Doc said, without any great show of interest, without even looking up. "Tim gave it to me last fall. Said it was the biggest one on the tree."

"And that makes me about the biggest liar in the world," Doc told himself, while he hoped that Pell would be delayed outside. As much as he felt the need to hurry along, he knew he couldn't. He couldn't push Joe's caginess too fast.

"You said that Tim wasn't too much help to Ma," Joe remarked, careless, as if only making conversation.

Doc flicked a hand as he pulled at his pipe. "You can't expect a boy of sixteen to do a man's work or have a man's know-how. Tim's not as big as you were at sixteen."

He was about to add, "When I pulled you through pneumonia," but checked it. Home and Tim would beat through Joe's armor of sullen hardness quicker than trying to soften him with a plea for gratitude he should feel for past favors.

"Did you ever hear him ask—ever hear him say anything about me?" Joe asked, the eagerness in his voice covered thinly with a harsh gruffness.

"Once lately, Joe," Doc lied, without compunction. "He said he sort of reckoned you didn't get the letters your ma wrote, or you'd have answered some of them."

Joe pushed himself up, his head against the logs at the end of the bunk, a surly defiance in his gray-green eyes.

"I'll play the hand this way. I can take whatever the law wants to hand out—if it can catch me."

Doc knocked the dottle out of his pipe. "I sort of thought you'd feel that way," he said. "But—" His words stopped, and he shrugged.

"But what?"

"I was just thinking that maybe your ma and Tim couldn't take it so good. Tim, being only a young sprout, might outgrow it, but your ma—well, women aren't built like men. They can't traipse off to other parts, where no one knows. They have to stay, and look back, and wish and cry a little that they had worked even harder than they did to make things better. But I don't reckon you'd know about that, being a man."

NOTHING in Doc's face showed he had made up his mind that this was the moment. Pell would be coming in any second now. He knew his words had penetrated Joe's sullen armor, but only a

test would show what they had struck at the core. He got up slowly from his chair.

"Joe, you have a good chance of mending all this before—before you do something that can't be mended. Give me your gun." Doc stretched out his hand. "I can stop Rafe Pell when he comes in."

Joe just stared at the old man for an instant, as if trying to focus his mind on the proposal. Then he laughed, a rasping noise that had no humor in it.

"You couldn't handle Rafe if you had a dozen guns. It's rough on you, Doc, but hell, we can't let you go back to Three Rivers. You ought to see that."

Doc felt the sweat of fear running down his arms, greasing the palms of his hands. He thought about Jessie. She wouldn't worry too much about him until late in the evening, then she'd go down to Lock's store and spread word around that he hadn't returned from Ezra Huffman's.

In the morning, Buck Tragger, the sheriff, would ride out to Ezra's and find out he hadn't been there. Buck would get a posse together and start searching, but with the gale blowing there wouldn't be any tracks to show where he had gone. No one would give the line camp a thought until next summer when the Three Star outfit brought their cattle up to the mountain meadows to graze.

"I'm an old man," Doc said, more to himself than to Joe, "living on borrowed time, I reckon. A few more years would only mean more riding in more blizzards to—"

"What the hell you get out of it?" Joe sneered.

"I've got a lot of satisfaction and contentment from it, Joe. The same thing that most men get out of an honest day's work when they sit around the fire in the evening with their families and look back at it, and plan about tomorrow. Such men go to bed and sleep like logs, and walk among their fellowmen looking every man straight in—"

Rafe Pell kicked the door open and stepped in. He tramped over to the fireplace and held out his hands to the heat, while his glance rode over the doctor.

Doc didn't actually see the man's cold, emotionless eyes. He didn't have to. He could feel them, and a sick and dismal feeling hit him like a blow in the stomach. This wasn't the same as a man dying in bed, a man who had made up his mind to it, he thought ruefully. He'd had too little time to prepare himself for it.

Pell let his glance slide over to Joe. "I'll rub the snow off the window when Doc and me take a walk. You ought to see it, boy. Do you good. You're a little bit chicken yet. Get on your coat, Doc. Wait! Maybe you could use it, Joe?"

"No!" Joe said, his voice a low gritty rasp.

Doc shrugged into his coat, praying a little, mainly for strength to walk to the door like a man. It would be a poor example for Joe to see him cringe or plead, which he knew would be useless to a man of Rafe Pell's makeup. He held out the buckeye toward the boy.

"Put it in your pocket, Joe. I don't expect I'll need it where I'm going."

Joe took the buckeye with the hand of his injured arm, his lips curling derisively as his glance cut to Pell.

"Get him started. I want to get out of here."

Pell canted his head toward the doorway as he jutted his fisted gun at the old medico. "Get started."

Doc crossed the room slowly and lifted the bar of the door. A gust of wind flung it open and a sheet of icy air swept a film of snow over the floor. He hesitated a second. He might ask them to see that word got to Jessie—

THE shadow of Pell's foot rose swiftly behind him.

The foot crashed against Doc's back, and the roar of a gun beat against his eardrums. He floundered through the doorway and fell face-down in the knee-deep snow, the breath going out of him in one long gust. He lay there for a long minute, his head spinning, trying to realize what had happened.

"Give me a hand!" he heard Joe shout.

Dazed, Doc pushed himself to his hands and knees, wiped the snow from his eyes and looked about. Rafe Pell lay sprawled in the cabin doorway. Joe Hallaran was moving toward him, his gun alertly up.

Doc rose up on legs that were weak and wobbly, weaker even than they had been when he had walked to the door. He looked at Joe from the corner of his eye, but Joe turned his head. Joe was afraid he was going to thank him, Doc thought. He dropped on his knees beside Pell, and shook his head. The fugitive was beyond any earthly help.

When they had pulled Rafe Pell to a corner of the room and covered him with his overcoat, Joe said, "Tragger, the sheriff, is out with a posse lookin' for us."

"Not in this blizzard. They came in before noon."

Joe considered that for an instant, a bleak wariness in his eyes. "I could get down to the place without much chance of bein' caught, if I go now." His narrow-eyed stare bored into Doc. "If I leave your horse and cutter, will you wait here till mornin'?"

"You're making a mistake, Joe, by running," Doc warned. "If you go into town with me, give yourself up—"

"I'm not crazy."

"Shooting Rafe Pell will help you a heap, boy. I'll do all I can, so will practically every other man in the valley." An idea clawed its way to the surface of Doc's mind. "I'll make you a bargain, Joe. We'll start now. I'll take you to see your ma and Tim, providing you give me your word to do what they want you to do about this."

"You'd take my word?" Joe asked, wary of the offer.

"Did you ever hear of me going against my word?" Doc said, no censure in his voice.

Joe shook his head. "No. I reckon not." He laid the pistol on the table. "Give me your hand on it."

Doc's knees were like hinges that wanted to fold when they were ready to leave the cabin; reaction had hit him hard. He knew that Joe had seen they were wobbly.

"Maybe you'd better give me back that old buckeye, Joe. Rheumatics are stabbing like cactus spines at my pins. You'd a heap rather have one from Tim, anyhow."

Something akin to a smile wiped the stubborn sullenness from Joe's face. "Sure, take it. I reckon us valley people will want your legs to hold out for a long time yet, Doc."

Joe opened the door and snow swirled in on a blast of frigid wind. Doc gulped a breath of it and felt good. He'd been through a lot of blizzards in his time. He hoped he'd live long enough to ride through many more.

Doc slipped the old buckeye into his pocket and the years rolled back, forty of them, to a summer's night—

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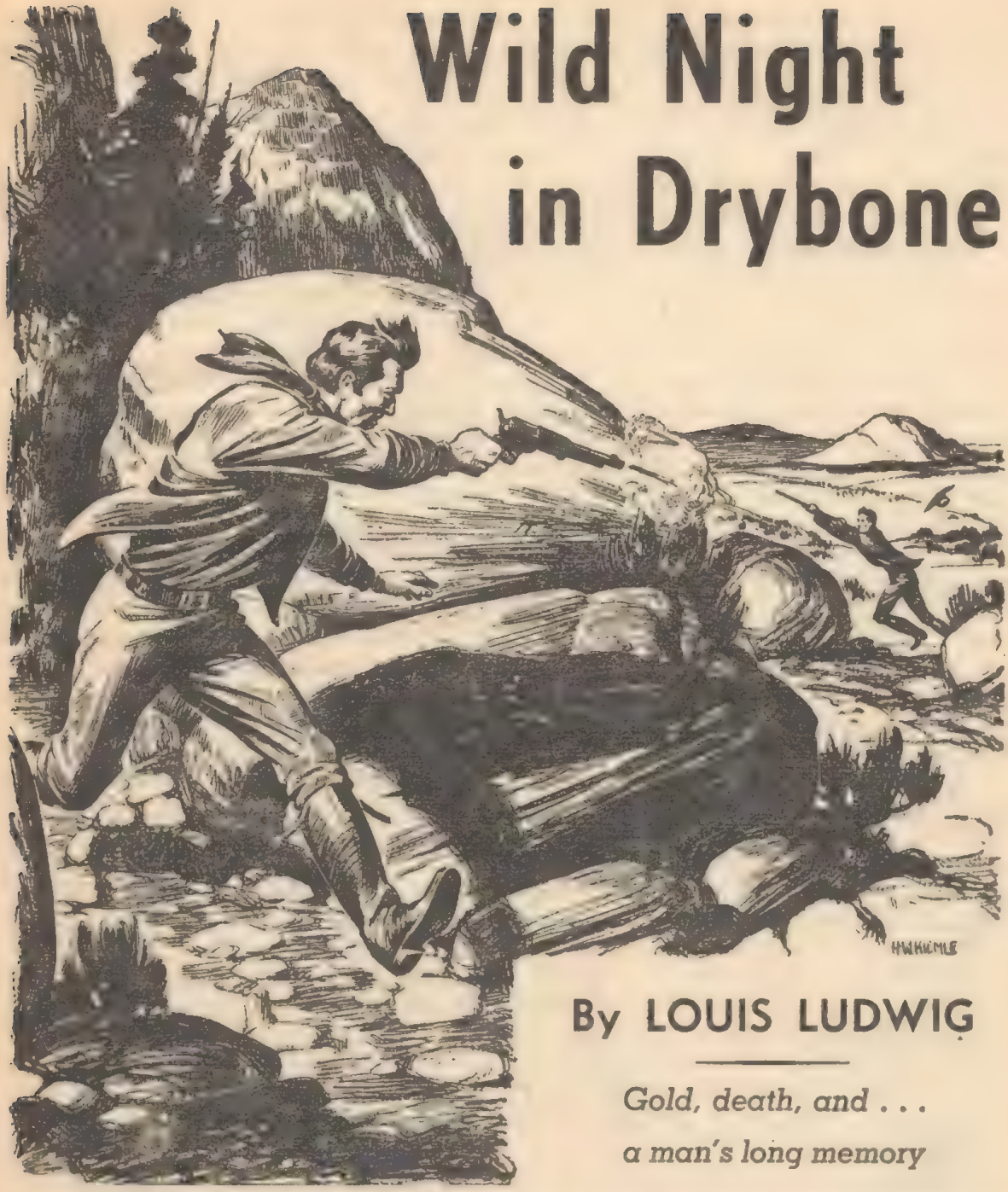

By LOUIS LUDWIG

Gold, death, and . . .
a man's long memory

FOLKS call me the Ghost, and I darn near once was. And I guess it does look a bit spooky to climb up here on the top of Lobo Hill, pretending that Red is by my side. Sometimes I'm right sure that he really is, too, as I look out for miles in all directions with the wind whistlin' by in a symphony of sounds.

This is our Lobo Hill—Red's and mine—and it all happened at a time when gold was king and life wasn't worth the price of a bullet. The world had gone mad. A workman had kicked a gold pebble loose at Sutter's Mill and, within a week, two thousand men were scratchin' the earth like hens. Within another week, a hundred thousand men and women were racin' wildly for the Sacramento Valley.

There were no houses for us. Leaky tents, muslin and slab shanties and mud huts were thrown up in a hurry. A cot in a tent with three other men cost fifteen dollars a night. Private rooms brought three hundred a month, payable in advance. I even recall payin' ten dollars a night for a rockin' chair.

And still we came, maddened by the thought of the golden pellets hidden in the earth, shinin' in the rivers. Day and night we came, with our wagon trains, our mules and pack horses and carts; and the never-endin' traffic cut deep ruts in the makeshift highways and turned them into gigantic mud-holes. In the rainy seasons, horses and wagons would all but be swallowed up by the mud. In some cases, horses and drunken men actually drowned in the mud, so that every now and then signs appeared readin':

This road is impassable;
Not even jackassable.

And yet we came. Prices zoomed to the stars and kept right on zoomin'. Only the very rich could afford vegetables, despite the nearby farms and ranches. Apples sold for five dollars each; potatoes were fifty bucks a pound; coffee was one dollar a cup and eggs cost up to sixty dollars a dozen. Nails brought forty a pound and houses were sold at the rate of a buck a brick and a dollar per foot of lumber. Wearin' apparel and minin' equipment were even worse: a good pair of boots cost two hundred; a flimsy blanket, fifty; a shovel, sixty; and a tin washbowl, ten.

And still we came. We came with a song on our lips, a song to the tune of "O Susannah!" and it went:

I soon shall be in Frisco,
And then I'll look around;
And when I see the gold lumps there
I'll pick them off the ground.
I'll scrape the mountains clean, old girl;
I'll drain the rivers dry;
A pocketful of rocks bring back,
So, Anna, don't you cry!

We came despite the Indians who waylaid us and killed us and our wives and children. We came despite the heat and the desert and the mountains and rivers. We came despite the confidence men and the gamblers and the fancy ladies who schemed to take our last dollar at the hundreds of honky-tonks that sprang up everywhere on the magic road to Cal-i-for-nye-a. We came despite the outlaws who waited for us at every turn and who made robbery and murder commonplace and casual.

For the year was 1849 and the world was mad with lust and every man was dreamin' the tantalizin' dream of gold. And it was in that year, here on this spot, that Red and I made our strike. . . .

IT WAS almost sundown on that day when Red and me finally pulled into Drybone, all sweaty and tired from three days of ridin'. We'd been celebratin' a while and now were headin' for Torrean to record our claim.

"But first," says Red, "I'm gonna get me a bath, a steak and a gal."

Red was a ladies' man from 'way back, I guess, and it was all I could do durin' the month we were up at the Hill to keep his mind on prospectin'. When he wasn't talkin' about wimmin, he was writin' 'em, like that long letter he sent off by the last stage when we hit Pecos City a couple of days before. Now that our buckskin bags was crammed with nuggets, I figgered it was no use even tryin' to keep him from the sex he loved the best.

We hitched up in front of El Dorado, had a boy look after our horses and walked in to arrange for a room. The bags we carried held no secrets and a mob soon crowded round at the bar, pumpin' for information.

One of the men, a big fella with a fancy black jacket and a superior leer, poured me a drink.

"Hilton's the name," he said. "I run this town."

I looked unimpressed.

"Seems like you boys made a lucky strike."

Red laughed. "Richest find yet," he said. "Should run ten thousand a day."

I gave him a nudge and he clammed up. The crowd followed us down the street to the barbershop where we got some five-dollar shaves, but we didn't spill anything. After, I headed for our room for some shuteye, but Red insisted on celebratin' a bit more before turnin' in.

The room was no better'n you'd expect in a town like Drybone. Raw wood was showin' in a dozen places in the walls, the bed creaked like it had rheumatism and I sure didn't need a microscope to see the insect life.

The room was up on the second floor with a flight of rickety stairs reachin' from a side street right up to our window. I checked it carefully and kinda wished Red was with me, 'cause I'd've felt much easier with a gunhand like Red in my corner.

Besides, I was a bit worried about Red and the map of our mine he carried in his pocket for the recordin'. No tellin' what he might spill with some whisky in his throat and a gal on his lap. Then I got to thinkin', hell, Red's a grown man and he can take care of himself, and first thing I knew I'd eased off to sleep with my .45 under my pillow.

It seemed like a few minutes later, but it was really past midnight when it happened. Three or four shots rang out. For a second, I froze motionless, then I jumped up, grabbed my gun and rushed to the window.

The pale yellow of the moon lit up everything and most of the town stretched out before me in a silence that was uncanny and frightful. Not a livin' thing was in sight; not a wisp of sound could be heard. I opened the window and stepped out on the landin'. No sound. No motion.

My first thought was to hunt up Red in a hurry, but then, I figgered, where could I look for the lug? Besides, Red's a match for any two men and, if he'd gotten into a fight, chances were it was the other side needed help. Then, too, them shots could've been anyone havin' a bit of innocent fun, includin' Red, himself, or—and here I was almost convinced—simply a bad dream playin' a bad joke on a tired prospector. I looked around again and, seein' nothin', stepped back into my room and got in bed.

I couldn't sleep, though. Red kept comin' to mind for it was pretty late. Where was he? *Had* he gotten in trouble? Were he and the map safe?

I was about to get up to look for him when the faint sound of footsteps came from the window. Someone was climbin' up, fixin' to rob me! Bracin' myself at the side of the window, I was about to come down with the butt of my gun, when I recognized the boots climbin' over the sill. It was Red and I reached over to help. My hand was painted with blood when I touched his back. I rushed him to the bed.

"What happened?" I asked.

A huge gash kept pouring blood from the right side of his chest. His face, once burned a chocolate tan by the sun, was now a sickly yellow. Huge beads of perspiration poured from his brow. His eyes, once full of laughter, were now closed in agony. His mouth opened and he tried desperately to talk.

"Who did it? Who?" I demanded.

The mouth moved again and whispers came out.

"Hilton's . . . men," Red managed. "They got . . . the map . . . but . . . copy. . . ."

"What?"

I placed my ear to his mouth to catch the last word, but it was no use. Red half rose, as if to make one final effort, then toppled back in bed. There was a convulsion or two, his face all twisted in pain, and he lay there all cold and quiet.

A gunshot in the street below brought me back to reality. I looked out cautiously to see a mob gatherin'. All the house lights in the street flickered on and everyone poured out and headed for El Dorado. The noise below became a roar, then a thunderous blast that shook the hotel. A mob was gatherin', headed by Hilton and his men and I didn't care at all for the ugly lookin' rope they carried for I could hear what they were yellin'.

"It's them prospectors," someone

screeched. "One's shot the other for his share of their mine!"

Things suddenly got clearer. They'd killed Red for our map and now they wanted to get me out of the way by lynchin' me for Red's death!

I could hear them comin' up the stairs by this time so I ran for the window. I didn't like the idea of leavin' my nugget samples behind, but this wasn't the time to quibble about trifles. They'd taken care of that exit, though, 'cause two triggermen were waitin' below for me and they lost no time sendin' a few pot shots my way. I froze against a wall just as the door flew open and the mob was on me. Someone threw me a rabbit punch and everything blacked out.

WHEN I came to, I found myself half-walking, half-dragged through town. Two burly gunhands, their faces twisted in hate, were pullin' me along. A third was holdin' a noose that had been put around my neck. Hilton was nowhere in sight, but his bellowing voice could be heard over the roar of the mob, urging them to do their damnedest.

Only a few of the mob, I knew, were Hilton's men, and paid triggermen can be expected to do anything. And a few of the others really thought I'd done murder, I guess, but I was amazed at the faces of the rest. There was hatred there and indifference and even laughter. Some hated me' cause I'd found gold and they hadn't. Others didn't care whether I was strung up or not. Still others were enjoyin' it all, as a good change from everyday monotony. At the rate we were goin', I could see we'd reach the trees on the edge of town inside of ten minutes.

I was wrong about one thing, though—there was someone who did care. Jumpin' on their mounts, Sheriff Baxley and a couple of his deputies galloped to the head of the procession, their guns drawn.

"Turn over your prisoner!" he demanded.

The mob protested. There were shouts of, "He's a killer!" and "Let's hang him!"

"We'll try him in the mornin'," said the sheriff. "If he's guilty, you can hang him before breakfast!"

"There's your killer!" I yelled, pointin' to Hilton.

The gunhand on my right gave my arm a paralyzin' twist.

"Let's get this over with!" he roared.

The mob surged forward angrily, but the sheriff held his ground and a few warnin' shots by his deputies won my release. Disappointed, the crowd followed us to the jail-house and milled around outside while the sheriff handcuffed me and locked me up. His work done for the moment, Sheriff Baxley and a deputy went home for some sleep while another kept guard.

Two things were pretty obvious to me by this time. First, come morning whatever trial I'd get would be pretty cut and dried. I'd be a dead duck in no time flat, what with that mob against me. Second, one of Hilton's men must've been a good piece on the way to Torrean by this time to record my mine in Hilton's name. Somehow, I had to beat him to Torrean and prove my innocence before it was too late. But how? Desperately, I tried an old trick and suddenly doubled up with pain.

The deputy was in my cell almost immediately.

"S'matter?" he asked.

I banged him on the head hard by way of answer and felt through his pockets for the keys to the handcuffs while he lay there limp on the cell floor. I finally found them in his moneybelt, snapped the cuffs on him and helped myself to his six-shooter. A quick peek out the window satisfied me the mob was still there, so I opened the back door and eased myself into the night. The deputy's pony was hitched nearby and I was on in two jumps, diggin' my boots into his sides so hard he was away in a gallop.

We were found out soon enough and the whole town came runnin' over to the other side of the jail-house, firin' a dozen shots our way. In no time at all, they were mounted and headin' my way.

What with the shots and my kickin',

my pony lined out like a scared rabbit, goin' down the draw and over washouts and creeks like he was on level country. He was stampedin' for the hills and it was the first time I ever had a ride like that and wanted it to last. Certainly the direction couldn't of been better. With luck, the hills would help me lose the posse and, if I could manage to cross 'em, I could save at least twenty of the fifty miles to Torrean. There was a fightin' chance I would beat Hilton to the recorder yet.

Luckily, I had twelve hundred pounds of lightnin' under me and we fairly flew over the ground. We must've been at least ten miles out of Drybone when I figger I'd better pull up a bit if I wanted a pony under me for very long after sunup, but we managed a pretty good trot for the next dozen miles or so into the hills.

BY DAYBREAK, we were both pretty tired. I could no longer see anyone behind us, so I figgered it was a good idea to rest for a while and give both of us a breather. We were a couple of thousand feet up and I could see into the valley for a good ten miles. I was kind of wishin' I was like my pony, gettin' an appetizin' meal outa a few clumps of grass when I saw a mass of dust arisin' in the distance. There was no doubt of it. The sheriff and his posse were catchin' up. At best, I had another half hour.

I jumped on again and caught the pony so by surprise he buckled up and tried to kick me off. In a minute, he was behavin' like the good horse he was, though, and leggin' it as fast as he could go. He was kinda winded when we got to the top, but I knew with all the twists and turns on the way down, I'd've run into plenty of good hidin' places just in case.

I took another look back and saw my pursuers had narrowed down to a couple who were well out front, with the rest trailin' behind. What I was most worried about was that the leaders would turn out to be, not Sheriff Baxley and a deputy, but Hilton and one of his men.

We picked our way down the rocky trail and over a couple of ridges and came into a little valley of white sage. It would of been kinda foolhardy, comin' out in the open and crossin' that stretch so we kept close to the foothills, then up a trail again 'til we got to the top of another rise lookin' down on a canyon so narrow no more'n one rider could get through at a time.

My pony was far gone by this time. To make things worse, he'd rubbed off some skin against a boulder a ways back on the trail and it was botherin' him so he wouldn't be much more good to a man on the run, so I pulled the saddle off his back and let him hobble off to some cool water and tall grass while I inched over to the edge of the canyon.

Somehow, somewhere, I had to get another mount if I wanted to clear myself and finish that ride to Torrean. Far off in the distance, I could see some tiny figures bobbing along in a cloud of dust as they neared the canyon. Closer and closer they came until, by squintin' hard, I could just make them out. A quarter-mile away, almost straight down, was Hilton, himself, his black coat flyin' in the breeze and his dapple gray filly stretchin' for all she was worth. A few hundred feet behind was the sheriff, doin' his best to keep up, with all the others strung out back in a line.

In my anxiety, I kicked a few pebbles down the canyon and, by the time they reached the bottom, so many others had joined in, the echoes of the noise sounded like summer thunder.

Hilton's filly stopped suddenly, and reared on its hind legs. He looked up and spied me just as I ducked behind a boulder. He grabbed his rifle and ran for cover while I cocked my sixshooter and waited. Off to the left, too, I could hear the sheriff and the others comin' in fast.

For an eternity, it seemed, I hugged that boulder, just listenin'. The sound of fallin' pebbles told me what I wanted to know—Hilton was inchin' along, comin' after me. Cautiously, I peered over the edge, but pulled back quick when the ping of a shell whizzed by, missin' by inches. Duckin' around the boulder, I ran for another shelter, takin' a pot shot at Hilton at the same

time, but I missed when he dropped flat.

For another eternity, we lay there quiet like, each waitin' the other out, while the rest of the mob stole up and took position. I was one against a dozen. The sun was high in the sky, hammerin' the rocky hillside around us. Heat danced on all sides. Hungry, thirsty, near exhausted from lack of sleep, I lay there and waited.

THEN Hilton made a mistake. He crouched into runnin' position and headed for another cover, but it was a bit too far away. I only had a split second, but it was enough and I winged him good. I could see his chest spurt red, but he held on to his rifle and ducked behind cover. A dozen shots from as many positions glued me to my spot. There wasn't a chance. The minute I'd show myself I'd get plugged for sure.

For a while, I debated givin' myself up to Sheriff Baxley. Somehow, I felt I could get a fair shake from him. But where was he? And would he be able to keep the others from stringin' me up as he'd done before? And how sure could I be he, too, wouldn't shoot to kill the second he saw me?

I knew Baxley and the others had come into the canyon just before the shootin' had got started, but just where he was, I'd be no idea. I waited a long time, then peered from behind my rock again. Everything was dangerously quiet. It was possible, I figgered, I'd gotten Hilton for good. I was about to break from cover again, when there was another *ping* and I felt a sharp pain in my right leg. It was as if someone had just slugged me over the head. I went down and everything turned black. . . .

When I came to again, someone was coolin' my face with a wet cloth. Somehow, I was in a bed—a clean bed—and there was a mass of people around. I felt my leg. It was stiff and sore, but I could feel a bandage on it.

"It's little more'n a crease," said someone. "Rest and a few good meals and you'll be good as new."

"Where am I?" I asked.

"Torrean," another voice offered.

I turned around quickly and recognized Sheriff Baxley.

"It's all right, son," he said. "You're cleared. When you got Hilton up in the hills, some of his men confessed and we got the whole story of how they framed you."

I sank back in relief, then remembered the mine. Baxley must've known what I was thinkin' 'cause he kept on talkin'.

"This mornin' they caught the last of the Hilton gang. When he rode into Torrean here to record your mine in Hilton's name, he rode right into the marshal's arms. You see—your mine was already recorded."

"That's impossible!" I protested.

He shook his head.

"No, it's true. Your partner figgered something might happen to one of you on the way here, so he made a copy of your claim and mailed it in by stage from Pecos City."

Pecos City! So that was the letter Red told me he'd written to some woman! I lay back on the pillow and laughed. I laughed as I thought of the needless bloodshed, the schemin' and counter-schemin', the sun and the heat and fifty miles of desperate ridin' and shootin'. And there, on the opposite wall, I could make out the freckled face and carrot top of Red—and he was laughin' with me.

Just the way he does when we're on Lobo Hill together. . . .

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He put the horse into a driving gallop

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By WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

Sixteen thousand dollars at the turn of a card— AT GUNPOINT!

♠ ♥ ♦ ♣

NEAL MASON'S heart was hammering with excitement and it took all of his considerable control to keep the tension from showing in his square, bronzed face.

"I'll call," he said, trying to make the words sound casual.

There was sixteen thousand dollars in

gold dust resting on the green felt table, and Neal knew his hand was good.

The circle of spectators muttered to each other and the sound ran like a ripple across the smoky room.

Facing Neal across the table was a man named Nathaniel Esterre, the last player in the game. He was thin, finely dressed, with thoughtful eyes and long graceful hands. Esterre owned the saloon in which they were playing and he owned many other profitable things in Palair, Texas; and like most rich men Esterre did not look forward happily to the prospect of parting with anything he owned, particularly sixteen thousand dollars in gold dust.

"You call, eh?" he said, and a muscle twitched along his jaw line.

Neal knew he was going to win this hand—but getting out of Palair with the money would be a different matter. He had a very important reason to ride on to Fort Worth that night. The smartest thing for him to do, considering that, was to let Esterre win the hand. But there was a hard stubborn streak in Neal that made him fight for what belonged to him; and now he felt he owned the sixteen thousand dollars in the pot.

"Yes, I'm calling," he said.

Esterre nodded slowly. "I consider myself called," he said. "But I'd like to know something about you, my friend. You arrive in Palair mysteriously and now I presume you are prepared to leave in the same manner. It is very curious, eh?"

"I arrived in town by riding down Main street," Neal said. "That's hardly a mysterious method of entry," he added drily. "About leaving—well, that's pretty much my own business. Anyway, what's this got to do with the game?"

"Nothing, perhaps," Esterre said, with a slight sigh. "You seem to be intelligent, my friend. I hope for your sake that you prove to be. Do you understand?"

Neal looked Esterre directly in the eye, and then he nodded. "I get what you mean, I think," he said. Esterre was telling him in so many words not to win this pot. Neal could throw his hand in without showing his cards, and Esterre would probably pat him on the back, buy him a drink, and let him go his way.

"Let's see your cards," he said.

Esterre showed three kings.

"Not enough," Neal said, and spread his three aces on the green felt table.

There was a stir of excitement in the crowd. Neal pulled the money toward him, and watched Esterre closely. He was ready for any play the man might make, but the gambler leaned back in his chair and lit a thin cigar with steady hands.

"Congratulations, my friend," he said. "I was obviously wrong about your intelligence, but I hope the money brings you good luck."

"I'm sure it will," Neal said.

BACK in his small hot room Neal packed up his few belongings hurriedly. He put the sacks of gold dust in the bottom of one of his saddlebags and crammed an extra shirt on top of them; and then he checked both his guns.

A knock sounded on the door. Neal stepped across the floor, pulling one gun from its holster, and jerked open the door. A small gray-haired man in a black coat stood in the corridor.

"I got your horse around back like you told me," he said, his eyes sliding nervously down to the gun in Neal's hands.

"Fine."

"Say, it ain't any of my business, but are you in some kind of trouble?"

"I don't know, Jake. I just won sixteen thousand dollars from a man named Esterre."

The old man whistled. "You're in trouble then, son. You shouldn't ought to have won that much money from him."

"That's why I'm clearing out," Neal said.

"Son, I'd hate to be in your spot when Esterre's men come after you."

Neal dropped the gun back in his holster with an easy, practised motion. "Well, would you like to be one of his men coming after me?" he said with a faint smile.

The old man studied Neal's compact shoulders and hard flat waist—and the two well-worn guns that hung against his

springy legs ready for business.

"I guess not," he said dubiously, and scratched his whiskered chin. "I guess I'd just kind of like to have nothing to do with it from either side."

Neal slung the saddlebags over his shoulder and stepped into the quiet empty corridor. "I'll say so long now," he said. "Got to meet my girl, coming by stage to Fort Worth, in the morning. Thanks for putting me up. We're all square, right?"

"Yeah, we're square. And good luck, son. Hope you make Fort Worth in good shape."

Neal waved to him and walked swiftly to the end of the corridor and cautiously opened the door. The night was dark, and only a few pale stars showed in the black sky. He saw his horse standing quietly at a hitching post near the alley. Neal waited a moment, accustoming his eyes to the darkness, and then he eased through the door and stood with his back to it for another moment or so. Everything seemed normally silent and still. He stepped away from the door and walked toward his horse, keeping his weight on the balls of his feet, and one hand in readiness above the butt of a low-slung gun.

Suddenly Neal's horse whinnied and side-stepped skittishly. Neal dropped to one knee, and held his breath. He heard a scraping sound back toward the alley and saw two shadowy figures moving past the darker bulk of his horse.

"We can spot him when he comes out the door." The words drifted to him in a hoarse whisper.

Neal's eyes were adjusted to the darkness now, and he saw the two bulky figures moving toward him, and could hear their boots scraping on the hard-packed earth.

"Freeze!" he said. "I'll blow holes in you if you make a move."

One of the men squawked in terror; but the second man threw himself sideways, his arm moving in a dark blur toward his gun. Neal rolled to his right as a flash of orange flame shot past his ear. His own gun leaped into his hand and he fired two shots at the man on the ground. There was a scream and then the sound of running footsteps; and Neal knew that one of the men was hit and the other had bolted.

His horse was rearing nervously as he crawled to its side. He got the horse between him and the gunman on the ground, and then swung himself into the saddle. Fortunately the bridle was looped in a loose granny knot about the hitching post and one jerk brought it free. Neal slapped his horse across the ears with his hat, and the animal leaped forward.

Two shots fanned past him as he raced through the narrow lane to the first intersection. Turning there, he cut over to Main street and put the horse into a dead driving gallop out of town. Men spilled out of saloons and stores as he thundered past, and he heard excited shouts on both sides of the streets. The town was thoroughly awake now, he thought bitterly, and it wouldn't take Esterre long to get his men into the saddle and onto his trail.

Neal had two choices. The first and safest was to rejoin his herd about twenty miles beyond Palair, where eight of his hands were waiting for him to return from Fort Worth. His men had grown up with him on his father's ranch, and they were more like brothers to him than employees. His second choice was to outrun Esterre's men and continue on to Fort Worth in the morning. He had to get to Fort Worth; but he knew now he was going to be half a day late.

Neal cursed himself thoroughly and effectively for having got into the poker game with Esterre. He had meant to kill an hour or so in Palair, and rest his horse for the twenty-two mile leg to Fort Worth; but the game had looked inviting and before he had realized what was happening he and Esterre were betting into each other with thousands of dollars riding on every hand.

He decided not to embroil his men in this fight. It was his fault, his foolishness that had got him to this spot; and his hard stubbornness forced him to play the rest of the game alone.

And so he put his horse into a wide circle that led him eventually around to the other side of the town of Palair; and once sure that he had doubled back on his pursuers he gave his horse a free head and settled down to a steady mile-eating gallop for the next three hours.

Finally he came to a stop and let his heaving horse rest. He patted the animal's wet neck and murmured, "There's nothing on four legs could have caught you, boy."

He gave the horse a drink from his hat, and then he removed the saddle and stretched out gratefully on the ground. He rolled and lit a cigarette and smiled up at the pale stars.

Tomorrow morning he'd be in Fort Worth, and Esterre and the sixteen thousand dollars wasn't half so important as that. . . .

THE OFFICE of the Star Stage Company was a one-story building between the Wells Fargo office and the Pioneer State Bank. Neal tossed the reins of his horse over the hitching rail and walked into the stage company's office. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, and the young man behind the only desk in the room already looked hot and played out. There was a pitcher of water beside his elbow and he was mopping at his forehead with a red handkerchief.

"Yes, sir, what can I do for you?" he said to Neal.

"The six o'clock stage in yet?"

"Sure thing. In and gone. We run our coaches on time."

"I know." Neal shoved his hat back on his head. "I was expecting to meet it but I got delayed. I was planning to meet my fiancee, Miss Nancy Miller. Did she come in on the six o'clock?"

The young man looked happier. He smiled up at Neal, and said, "I'll say she did, mister. Your girl a blonde, about so high, with big blue eyes?"

Neal was grinning. Suddenly the tiredness left him, and he felt just fine. "That's her, all right. Where is she? Over at the hotel, I suppose."

"No, those fellows you sent for her took her back to Palair. You kind of got your signals mixed, I guess. They said you were waiting there for her, so off she went. Hey, what's the matter?"

Neal rubbed his forehead and sat down slowly.

"Mister, you look sick. Here, have a glass of water."

Neal knew what had happened. He had told Jake, the old innkeeper, why he was coming to Fort Worth. And Esterre must have got that information from Jake.

He stood up and stared unseeingly at the young man and the glass of water the young man was holding out to him; and then he turned and ran down the steps to his horse. . . .

NEAL trotted into Palair at four o'clock that afternoon. His face was coated with alkali dust and his shirt was plastered to his back with perspiration. His body ached with weariness, and there was a stubble of dust-coated whiskers along his jaw; but his eyes were cold and steady.

He dismounted and threw the horse's reins over the hitching bar before Esterre's saloon. Two men on the porch of the saloon stared at him for a second or so with elaborate disinterest before turning and sauntering through the swinging doors. Neal removed the saddlebags from his horse and threw them over his shoulder; and then he walked slowly up the steps and into Esterre's saloon.

There were only six or eight men at the bar, and a few others sitting about at the tables. However, they were all Esterre's men, Neal knew. He turned then toward the gaming tables and saw the gambler sitting alone and calmly shuffling a deck of cards. Neal walked across the room and sat down opposite him. Esterre glanced up at him, smiled and nodded.

"We thought you'd rode on, my friend," he said.

"I decided to come back. I got thinking this morning that it wasn't right not to give you a chance to win some of your money back."

Esterre looked puzzled. "You came back to gamble with me?"

"That's right." Neal put the saddlebags on the table and unbuckled the compartment that held the money. Then he put the sacks of gold dust on the table in a neat row.

"That's quite a lot of money," Esterre said. He lit a cigar, his eyes brightening with interest. "What kind of a game do you want to play?"

"I'd like to cut for it. One card, winner take all."

"That's pretty steep."

"I wouldn't worry if I were you," Neal said. "I'm pretty intelligent, after all."

Esterre grinned faintly. "I was sure you would be," he said. Spreading the deck across the green felt tabletop, he selected a card and glanced at it without expression. Then he flipped it out, face up. It was the four of spades. "Not too good, eh?" he said.

"It will probably win," Neal said. He drew a card, glanced at it. The queen of diamonds. He put the card back in the deck without showing it to Esterre. "My luck's run out," he said. "The money is yours, Esterre."

"Well, now isn't that interesting," Esterre said mildly. "Who'd have thought my little four would stand up?" He glanced at Neal and raised his eyebrows. "Say, I almost forgot. A couple of my boys were in Fort Worth this morning and met a friend of yours off the stage. They figured you were still here so they brought her over to Palair. Then we learned that you'd pulled out. But I knew you'd be back because you're an intelligent young fellow."

"Where is she now?"

"At the Widow Brown's. That's a mile out the north end of town. She's very comfortable, you'll find. Your friend, that is."

"She'd better be," Neal said. He slung the saddlebags onto his shoulders and looked down briefly at the sixteen thousand dollars in dust on the table. "So long, Esterre," he said, and walked out of the saloon. . . .

The Widow Brown's place was a two-storied frame house set back a hundred or so yards from the road. Neal went up the rickety steps quickly and hammered on the door with the heel of his palm. The woman who answered his knock was old, gray-haired, sly looking; he brushed her aside impatiently and strode into the hallway. Then he saw her, sitting in the parlor with a cup of tea beside her on a low table.

"Nancy!" he said in a low voice.

She turned to his voice, a warm, relieved smile breaking over her face. "Neal!" she cried. And then they were in each other's arms.

"I was so worried when you didn't meet the stage," she said later. "Then everybody's been behaving so strangely. Is anything wrong, Neal?"

He held her away from him, his hands on her slim waist, and looked her up and down, from her shining golden hair, to the tips of her absurdly small patent-leather shoes. "No, nothing's wrong, baby. Not one single thing. Soon as I arrange for a buckboard we'll ride out and join the herd. The boys are crazy to see you."

THE MOON was glowing softly in the sky and a cool wind blew down from the mountains in the south. And there was a fresh smell of rain in the air. The cattle were bunched together contentedly, enjoying the coldness and the silence.

Neal got up quietly from his blanket roll, and strolled to the chuckwagon where one of his hands was drinking coffee.

"Randy, I've got to ride back to Palair for a few hours," Neal said. "You tell Nancy that I'll be back for lunch sure."

"Sure thing, Neal. And if you don't mind my saying so, you sure picked a looker."

Neal smiled faintly. "Yes, I did," he said. "And I don't mind your saying it. Not one bit."

Ten minutes later, on a fresh horse, he rode out of camp. . . .

The town of Palair was dark and quiet. Neal turned off Main street and rode down behind the row of false-fronted buildings.

At the rear of Esterre's place he reined his horse and dismounted.

He prowled about in the darkness for a few minutes looking for some way to get to the top of the building and finally found the rungs of a ladder that was nailed to the wall. When he reached the roof he saw a window behind which candlelight was burning. Neal eased his way across the roof, until he could peer through the window. And then he saw Esterre sitting at a cluttered desk, and beside him one of his men.

He wasted another few minutes trying to decide what the best course of action would be. He knew he was being foolish and crazy now; and that realization almost made him turn and go back down the ladder to his horse. Nancy was with him, slender, beautiful, loving; and he was risking his life with her by making this reckless play. But he had to risk it, he realized. Something inside would never be the same if he let Esterre go free.

He kicked in the window and clambered into the room with a gun in his hand.

Esterre and the other man wheeled about, but they were too late. Their hands stopped above their guns as they stared into the muzzle of Neal's forty-five.

"You fool!" Esterre said softly.

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm a gambler, Esterre. I came back for a little game."

"You won't get away with this."

"I'd like to cut you for sixteen thousand dollars," Neal said. "That's pretty sporting of me, I think. I could just take it, of course. But I'm giving you a chance at it, the same chance you gave me. Get the money, Esterre."

"It's not here, it's in the bank," Esterre said.

"Don't lie to me, Esterre."

"I'm not lying."

Neal sighed. "Very well, I'll have to shoot you then." He cocked his gun.

"You're crazy," Esterre said hoarsely. "Buck, get the dust."

The man called Buck backed toward a small safe near the door. "Don't bring out anything but the dust," Neal said.

"No, no, I won't," Buck said.

"Bring 'em over and put 'em on the desk," Neal said.

When the man obeyed Neal smiled at Esterre. "Now we're going to cut cards," he said. "Got a deck?"

"Yes, in the drawer here."

"Okay, take it out."

Esterre opened the drawer slowly and removed a deck of cards.

"Spread 'em out," Neal ordered. "I'll draw first."

He took a card, glanced at it and flipped it onto the desk face up. It was the three of clubs. "Pretty low card," he said, casually. "You should be able to beat that easy, Esterre." He lifted the muzzle of his gun until it was pointing squarely between Esterre's eyes. "Now go ahead and draw, my friend. You're sitting just the way I was this afternoon when you had my girl hid away. I was under a gun, and so are you. So draw your card."

Esterre wet his lips and loosened his collar. "You'll shoot me if I win," he said in a cracked voice.

"That's right," Neal said.

"And what if I lose?"

"We'll see about that," Neal said.

Esterre drew a card quickly, then shoved it back into the deck. "You win," he cried weakly.

"That's fine," Neal said, and brought the barrel of his gun down across Esterre's head. Buck, caught off-guard, lost the chance to draw. "Turn around," Neal told him. "This really pains me," he said. He raised the gun again and this time it cracked against Buck's head. Neal picked up the money, crawled out the same window by which he had entered. . . .

Nancy was having breakfast when Neal trotted into camp. She got to her feet and hurried to him as he dismounted.

"That's a fine way to treat your future wife," she said, smiling. "Rushing off the first night like this."

"It won't happen again," he said.

"Well, maybe it's a good thing. You look like you've just won a million dollars."

"Not quite," Neal said, and swung her into his arms.

He fingered the trigger of his sixgun

RIMROCK RIVALS

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

HE STOOD grandiosely poised on a plateau shelf, high above the undulating cattle range whose brush-studded folds of land were bathed in dazzling sunshine.

"Wela," the Indians called him, this handsome young chestnut colt. It was a most expressive name which, translated, meant "He." Wela was the outstanding member of the entire wild-horse band of the lower Shoshones, and as he stood in all his glory, he seemed conscious of the simple majesty of his name.

His cream-colored mane and tail pennanted in a soft summer breeze; otherwise, he was as immobile as if carved from

The wild young stallion could not accept defeat

the tawny rock at his back as he searched the wind with fluted nose. On his muscled chest a salty crust was forming. A recent long run and stiff climb at the head of the band had broken him into a glistening sweat.

Notwe, his old sire, former guardian stallion of the band, had passed away. No longer would Wela be inspired by Notwe's wild buglings and whistlings . . . nor would they ring in his ears as challenges as he developed to a state of handsome maturity.

Now he stirred as an old mare minced up to flank him. She was Naka, his mother, who for years had shared the leadership of the band with Notwe.

Wela curled his upper lip, baring his teeth as she began to gently chew his neck. He resented her caresses, for he was still flushed with the glory of his magnificent run from those man creatures below who sought to cut out some of the members of the band.

Either by instinct or consciousness, Wela had begun to sense the importance of his new role as successor stallion to Notwe, yet Naka was the wise one. Her instincts were sharper through their development in many gruelling experiences over the years.

She started forward and nipped him sharply in the neck. Wela snorted, laid back his ears threateningly, but the old mare whipped about, ready to lash out with her battery of rear hoofs.

Shaking his head in anger, Wela gradually controlled his angry impulses. Head high, he wheeled and climbed to a level where, poised on the rimrock, he conned the valley below. But there was no longer any sign of the riders.

At last he turned in to a small spring gushing from a cleft in the rock wall of the narrow plateau. He dipped his muzzle into the cold water in the catch basin and drank. Shortly, he was rolling luxuriously in the sandy soil of an old mountain sheep lick. . . .

Below, Naka stood guard while her handsome son settled to rest.

In this wild range there was little opportunity for complete, unbroken rest. From time to time Wela started, as his keen nose brought him whiffs of danger scent.

For the past two weeks, wild-horse hunters had pursued Wela and the band with ruthless persistence. Though Wela could not know that it was he the riders sought especially, he was fearfully alert at all times.

His and Naka's responsibilities were great. Running with the band were gangly-legged colts and fillies of this season's get, beautiful horseflesh; others, shaggy, inbred creatures which man would leave alone. But Wela and Naka protected sleek and shaggy alike.

Wela had accepted the responsibility attending the inheritance of old Notwe with a stout heart. Often he remained behind the main band in flight, to haze along weary or recalcitrant young stock while old Naka led. Throughout the days, while the band rested, Wela alternated his catnaps with periods of sentinel duty.

Now, as evening encroached and the sun flushed the valley and the mountains with gold and rose, Wela stirred. He shook the salty dust from his coat and moved on down to join the band. His flanks were lean, for not in the past two days had the man creatures allowed him to graze for longer than it would take to snatch a mouthful of grass along the escape route.

Hunger is one of the keenest enemies of the wilderness creatures, often forcing them down to favorite meadows—lush grass flats which man knew too well.

This evening as he rejoined Naka, the chestnut colt was content to let his mother exercise her great wisdom. He snuffled softly as she turned and called to the band, to lead them on down an old elk trail to a ridge-flanked meadow flat.

Wela remained on the plateau, from which vantage point he had a clear view of the narrow meadow and the valley to eastward. Head high, he scouted for danger sign. Now and then his nostrils flared and quivered as alien scents came whipping up on a fickle, shifting breeze.

As the final tip of the sun was drawn

down into the maw of a mountain pass and purpling shadows skipped across the ruggled craglands, Wela spun. A stirring breeze brought the dread scent of lion—the scent of Acheeta, the queen cougar or one of her kindred. Lion! Among the greatest of all dangers to the wild-horse band. The big cats had begun their weaving stalk in quest of their favorite food—the succulent flesh of young horse.

IT WAS not long before Wela's beautiful coat was awash with the sweat of fear. The solid thumping of his heart gave percussion accompaniment to the gentle whistle of the wind in the brush below.

Then suddenly a wild scream reached his ears. It was a cry from old Naka, and straightway the powerful son of old Notwe, the king, lunged on down the decline toward the meadow flat.

A half moon flooded the valley as Wela drummed along the meadow toward his huddled band. The cat smell was strong in his nostrils, but an eddy of wind brought the colt to a skidding halt. On the breeze had come the sharp tang of man scent! Wela stood as if frozen, but the man scent faded as the wind settled.

Suddenly there was a movement of panic in the band. Wela bounded forward. A shaggy little colt was down, and Wela's eyes blazed as a long cat shape began to weave about the foal's inert form.

This cat was a young male cougar, El Leon, one of Acheeta's litter of last year. As he turned his face to Wela, it became transformed into a hideous grinning mask.

Wela's nostrils were touched with the scent of fresh blood—the blood of the foal whose neck was twisted—stark tribute to the power of the lion's terrible fangs and claws.

Fear is often a stimulant to courage. Wela's agitation mounted and suddenly the heritage of his great sire came pounding into his consciousness.

He screamed as he reared. Half wheeling in midleap; he chopped downward with his forehoofs, but the cougar was alert, and with a lithe whip of his body he evaded a blow. With lightning-like speed he coiled and struck.

Wela jerked up his neck, but not quickly enough to escape a raking in the muzzle by those terrible talons. The searing pain touched off the detonator of all his wild savagery. . . .

HUNKERED down in a nearby wolf willow thicket, the wind in his favor, Tom Rawlin, tophand, horse-hunter, licked his suddenly parched lips as he watched the wild battle join in earnest. It was Rawlin's scent that had recently brought Wela to a halt. The hunter had carried on the chase, while his companions had given up and returned to their ranch.

Now the man fingered the trigger of his sixgun. He was ready in an instant to throw down on the big cat, should the handsome chestnut colt get into difficulty.

Wela bugled as with bared teeth he rushed the cougar, but again the beast slipped a forehoof blow. But this time Wela was prepared for that sharp counter-blow. He whipped to one side, then twisted his body superbly in an end swap and caught the lion a glancing blow on a shoulder, rolling him over against a fringe of scrub willows.

Quickly the colt rushed to press his advantage. The lion was hurt, his reflexes dulled, and as he coiled to attempt a counter-thrust, forehoofs smashed him deeper into the thicket.

Wela stood and tossed his head as he stamped his powerful hoofs, drumming a proclamation of his victory and of his majesty. When he heard the cougar stirring in the brush, he screamed and struck forward, but El Leon was dragging himself off to safety.

Suddenly, the colt snorted and wheeled away in terror, for again he caught the sharp tang of man scent. It was alarming, fresh and close. He whinnied as he rushed toward the band and instantly Naka swung out to lead them in flight toward the crag-lands. . . .

Back at the edge of the thicket, Tom Rawlin parted a bush to stare out along the narrow meadow flat. He shook his

head slowly as he watched his quarry, the big colt, cutting back a frightened youngling, turning him and hazing him along in the tracks of the main band.

"Take him away from the band," the hunter told himself, "and they wouldn't last out a full year!"

Yet Rawlin was determined to carry out his patient hunt for, more than anything, he longed to dab the loop of his catch rope on that beautifully arched chestnut neck.

Now, as he craned his neck, the man saw the wild-horse band climbing. For a brief moment or so he glimpsed Wela poised on a rimrock shelf, magnificent as the moonlight splashed him. And then the colt merged with the shadows.

THROUGHOUT the night Wela nibbled on the tender shoots of wild fruit shrubs and other deliciously flavored herbage as slowly he followed on in the band's tracks. The old mare was leading them along a tortuous trail through a narrow pass.

Wela now nuzzled a lagging foal, attempting to thrust her along, but at last the little one folded her legs and slumped to rest. Wela uttered guttural calls, but the foal stretched herself at full length, and at last Wela composed himself and settled to another term of guardianship.

Wild, frightening scents struck his nostrils—the dread tang of silvertip and cougar as he stood guard beside the sleeping form of the little filly.

Shortly before dawn he thrust his muzzle deep into a dew-laden dogwood shrub, laving his mouth and tongue with the cool moisture. Now he minced forward to nose the filly awake. She sprang to her feet and began to punch Wela's flank with her nose, until he nipped her and started her forward.

On they traveled, over narrow shelves of outcrop rock, down into and along deep, shadow-filled draws where Wela found some tender grass. From time to time the filly whinnied plaintively in her great hunger. Not yet weaned, she came again and again to Wela's flank, but he thrust her from him, urging her on, until at last a hoarse, deep-throated whinny sounded, and a shaggy little mare came bounding back. There were mixed sounds of elation as the foal found her mother.

Wela turned away and found a patch of grass and shortly his grinders were at work as he feasted contentedly and fully for the first time in days.

The main band members were grazing nearby, though some of the young stock had already nursed and were slumped to rest. Though danger scents became threatening from time to time here at this haven draw, it was not until grizzly scent became very fresh that Naka led the band off.

Wela followed slowly along, bringing up the rear, every now and then whirling as he caught whiffs of man scent. . . .

Riding a stocky bay saddler and leading a rusty little roan pack pony, Tom Rawlin came along at a slow, patient gait. He did not force the pace of the wild band and whenever wind shifted, he quartered, or circled in order to avoid giving Wela and the band his scent.

As he made camp tonight, with the moon almost at its full, Rawlin was startled by a shrill wild stallion bugle. He swung, his forehead ridged and furrowed. That cry had not come from Wela, the chestnut. It came from an older, deep-chested stallion. Up in the rimrock country, Wela was being challenged by a powerful rival!

RAWLIN had known wild stallions to kill one another in battle. If not by actual hoof blows, by hurling an opponent over the lip of a canyon rim. He had witnessed such action, and he shuddered with misgiving for Wela—a young stallion not yet equipped with the full wisdom and power that comes with maturity and long experience in battle.

Now ringing in high-pitched tones came the wild counter-challenge by Wela. Up at the westerly end of the draw, Wela was alert. He quivered as his anger and hatred mounted at the sharpening of the scent of the alien stallion.

He snuffled hoarsely as he glimpsed the intruder come trotting forward. He was an oldster stallion, dark, short-coupled, with ugly Roman nose. His squat conformation cast a Gargantuan shadow. Wela minced and swayed as the lather of mounting agitation gathered to soak his sleek coat.

The old stallion tossed and shook his head, curled his lip and exposed his long dark teeth. He lunged forward, chopped to a halt, and then rose, screaming, to flail empty air with his ponderous forehoofs.

This outburst inspired Wela, as it inflamed him. He bounded forward, to rear and strike, but was met with a sharp counter-attack. Wela took several blows that rocked him back almost on his tail. Before he could recover his equilibrium, he took a savage two-hoofed blow in the chest.

Old Naka came mincing in, to take a stand, head high. Many times she had watched the great Notwe join battle with would-be usurpers, but Notwe had always emerged victorious. Wela, his son, lacked the great one's cunning and power.

The chestnut became charged with some of Notwe's fighting spirit as he whirled and dealt his opponent two terrific smashes to the barrel, blows calculated to hurt the old one's wind. The old stallion backed off. He hung his head and swayed on his feet.

Though an outcast, possibly having suffered defeat at the powerful hoofs of a younger stallion, he possessed much wisdom and cunning. When Wela charged again, the old one whipped to one side. Again and again he slipped Wela's roaring charges. He was sparing himself, forcing the younger stallion to expend much of his energy, then suddenly he galvanized to action and lashed out with a forehoof that caught Wela a terrific blow in the side of the head.

The handsome young chestnut dropped to one knee, only to take a battering in chest and flank. Screaming now at full lung power, the oldster pressed his advantage and Wela was forced to stagger to the safety of a scrub thicket where, head low, he sought to recover normal breathing.

When at last he raised his head, he saw the old stallion poised on a rise of land. He heard his rival's cries of conquest and then he quivered as he watched the old one wheel and trot to flank old Naka . . . and soon, they were gone, engulfed by the shadows.

WELA moved on alone, up into the higher rimrock country where he settled for two days and nights near water and short grass. He did not stir when a small band of mountain sheep came down to drink. There was a sharp hurt in his body and in his high-spirited soul.

Day followed night. . . . His band had moved along, hazed now by the dark-gray oldster. Wela had attempted to follow but twice he was driven off by the usurper. . . .

Now he turned away to find new range.

Slowly, he rebuilt his body back to normal condition; the old fire became rekindled in his brain, as he thrived throughout the summer and fall.

Then came a day when a whipping, screaming blizzard kept him humped against a grove of quaking aspens. Early winter had struck the wild range with ruthless force, and before the blizzard had at last screeched itself out, Wela's flanks had again become hollowed.

When at last the sun broke through the cloud masses, Wela lifted his head and whistled. He shook snow from his coat and reared. Then he started on down through the drifts, to seek windblown areas where there might be grass.

On he roamed, but steadily he was being forced down to the lower land in search of food. As the winter tightened and the first heavy snows became settled, he was startled by the wailing of wolves at dusk—a wolf family which had packed to hunt together.

It was the wolf pack which forced Wela on toward winter cattle range. He found some comfort and support in the sweaty tang of whitefaces huddled in the breaks not far off. In time he ventured closer, but every now and then he halted, freez-

ing, for their scent was attended by the tang of man scent.

It seemed an age before he edged forward to nibble at the hay on which the cattle were feeding. Eagerly his grinders went to work on the sweet cured grass of the summer season. It was while thus feasting he caught a sharp whinny, and wheeled, to see a small sorrel filly standing not far off. Now she minced toward him and he shrank back, for man scent blended with hers.

As he turned and moved off, the filly trailed him. She called softly every now and then, but not for two days did Wela stand and permit her to approach. He challenged her with laid back ears and exposed teeth, but she offered no threat to his safety or peace of mind.

The little sorrel snuffled reassuringly and at last, though ready to wheel and lash out with his rear hoofs, Wela stood and allowed her to touch his muzzle with her quivering lips. . . .

Back in the cover of the breaks, the man creature chuckled softly to himself.

"Nice work, kitten," he said softly.

RAWLIN'S patience was unbounded. He had laid his plans for the capture of the outcast colt with great skill. He had, from a distance, followed Wela's movements since the night of his defeat at the flying hoofs of the old stallion.

The freeing of the sorrel filly was his master stroke of strategy. In time, he knew, the sorrel would lead the stallion on toward the small homeyard corral, where Rawlin had skilfully laid other plans for Wela's capture. . . .

As the winter dragged on in all its ruthless might, Wela and the filly remained close to the cattle, feeding on the fresh hay scattered in the shelter of the breaks. But at last the filly grew restless. She started on toward the northeast, halting every now and then to swing and call. But Wela hesitated. He shook his head savagely from side to side as he cried hoarsely, in an effort to bring his companion back.

The filly continued on in her course, and at last Wela followed timorously along in her tracks. An almost full moon flushed the wild range, and Wela started, shying at shadow shapes which flitted across the filly's back trail. It was the sudden close-in wail of a she-wolf that sent Wela bounding forward. Ahead, the filly had heard, and was in full-gaited lope along a clearly defined cow trail.

Suddenly, Wela skidded to a halt. The man scent was sharp, and was blended with the acrid tang of wood smoke. It was some time before he could venture forward and when he came to an avenue of sentinel-like posts his body shook with misgiving. But a sharp wolf cry forced decision upon him and he bounded forward, almost catching up with the filly as she entered an enclosure.

Suddenly Wela swung and reared, but he was too late. He heard a sharp man voice and then the clack of hard wood on wood. He leaped forward but the gap through which he had come was now closed. He was trapped!

The filly was with him in the corral, the enclosure of heavy lodgepole pine rails. Wela blew shrilly and backed away. He lunged, wheeled, and struck powerful rear hoof blows at the poles, but to no avail. He limped as he minced away to regather his fighting forces.

Now he whirled and whistled at the sound of a man's voice. He laid his ears back flat and bared his teeth as he glared at the man.

"Take it easy now, boy," came that soft-toned voice. "I won't hurt you, but you'll sure hurt yourself lambastin' those poles —mebbe break a leg."

Wela cocked an ear. He could hear the steady crunch of the filly's grinders on sweet-smelling hay. Every now and then she raised her head to snuffle softly, but his flanks grew gaunt before, at last, on the second night of his captivity, he limped to her side and lowered his head to snatch up a mouthful of hay. He had laved his burning mouth with snow every now and then. . . .

In the colder nights, the filly moved into the shelter of a small log shed where

she bedded down in comfort on hay, but Wela catnapped standing, starting every time a northwest wind brought him faint whiffs of Naka and his wild band. These blowing scents fired him to action—to again attempt to batter down the barricade. But again he was forced back, with fresh hurts to fetlock or pastern.

TIME dragged on. He saw little of the man save when fresh hay was brought up. But this morning, the man stayed longer than usual. He whistled softly, and talked. He climbed to a seat on the top-rail of the corral.

Wela suddenly laid back his ears and reared. He lunged forward to strike, but something hissed toward him. He whirled away, but that something dropped about his neck—a snaky thing which almost choked him as he lunged away.

Coughing, gagging, the chestnut rushed forward, but again and again the rope tightened, snubbing his head down, until he was forced to stand, tongue lolling. When the man whipped the noose free, Wela screamed and drove savagely at the bars at the opposite side of the corral.

Each day the man came with the catch rope, and each time Wela fought with all his fury. Finally, the man whipped a second rope about his forelegs, front-footing him, and in a short time the lathered colt was snubbed securely down to a stout post in the center of the corral. Then, for the first time in his life he felt the touch of man's hand. He quivered and shrank as that hand ran down his neck and withers. The man was making soft voice sounds.

Wela laid back his ears and made ready to snap with his strong teeth, but there was no freeway. He was powerless to bite or strike. He was left thus secured for the balance of the forenoon, and for the forenoons that followed for nearly a full week.

He became more accustomed to the touch of the man's hand and discovered that no harm came from it. Yet when the ropes were flicked clear, he reared and showed fight. Today as the ropes were freed, Wela tossed his head savagely, for there was about his neck and muzzle a strange thing of leather. He was haltered.

When, a week later, a saddle was hoisted to his back, he bowed his back and snorted wildly with mixed feelings of hatred and of fear. His heart almost lunged from its moorings when the man stepped up into the saddle. As he felt that weight on his back, Wela's every nerve grew taut. He attempted to burst the heavy cinch strap. He tried to turn his head, to bite, but there was not sufficient freeway.

As he stood, snubbed tightly to the post, when the man had steped down, and left, Wela groaned in his anguish, and in his inability to counterattack.

WHENEVER free, the colt continued to fight, step up his fury in fruitless but savage attacks on the poles. This evening, as he scraped the strange thing on his head against the poles, he paused, and cocked his head. A soft wind was fanning down the rangeland, a warm wind, and shortly Wela was listening to the musical tinkle of water running under thin ice at a nearby creek. He blew stertorously, conscious of the approach of spring.

Snow was being melted by persistent warm winds and strengthening sunlight, and the tang of the wild band became stronger in Wela's nostrils from night to night. And daily, with consummate patience, the man came and put that awful weight on Wela's back.

This morning, it happened again, then suddenly, the snubbing ropes were freed while the weight still clung. It was a moment or so before Wela realized he had the scope for action. Now screaming, he lowered his head, half rose, and whirled in a terrific end-swapping maneuver which sent the man spinning, to crash heavily against the snubbing post.

Wela again screamed as he whirled. He reared and came chopping down, and only the post saved Tom Rawlin from a stove-in chest. He had injured his right shoulder as he crashed against the post. Now,

he got to his feet and whirled, lunging to safety behind the little log shed, as Wela rushed him. . . .

It was a strange man who came to rope and snub down and unsaddle Wela—an older man who, when the colt was free, was lucky to escape. Wela lunged for him, striking. The oldster was not able to close the pole gate. There wasn't time, for the wild colt was right at his heels.

Wela halted for a brief moment, then with the sharp realization of freedom, he rose superbly and lunged to the open, whistling shrilly. Shortly he halted and wheeled. Head high, he called to his companion, and the little filly snuffled an answer as she moved out through the gateway.

The man attempted to cut her off, but she rose and bounded forward.

Wela turned and broke into full lope, and the little sorrel pounded on in his trail as he led in a tireless run toward the foothills and then up into the stiffer climbs to the rimrock craglands.

FOR TWO days and two nights Wela and the filly moved up into his old haunts, halting every now and then to graze and rest. On the third evening, with the moon at its waning half, he was startled by the tang of remembered scents. He wheeled and trotted off along a favorite old rimrock plateau, only to come to a sharp halt as a heavy form thrust through an inside grove of scrub brush. Then came the ringing bugle of the old stallion.

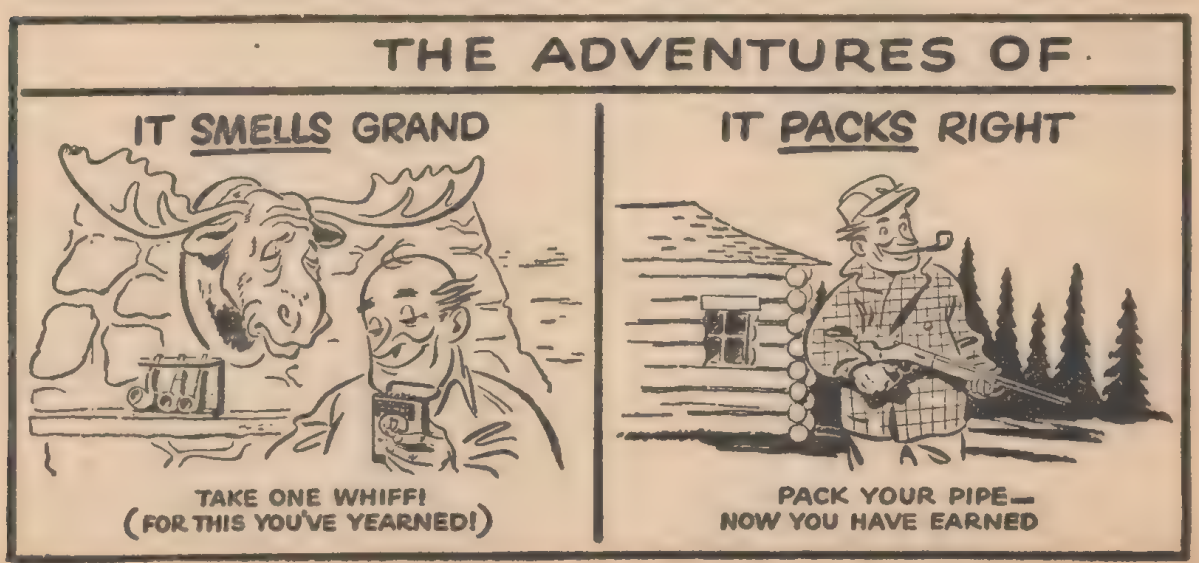
Wela rocked back, quivering. Here was his arch enemy, the intruder whose hoofs had so battered him a few months ago. Fear possessed the younger stallion, but only until there came to him in wild pulsations the pounding beat of his sire's inheritance, the stout fighting heart now inspired to fighting action.

The filly backed into the shadows of the scrub thicket to quiver as she glared, wide-eyed, at the two stallions.

From a point of vantage above, his injured arm still slung, Tom Rawlin sat and licked his dry lips. He had lost no time, once his arm had received attention, in getting out on the trail of Wela and the filly.

Now Rawlin gasped as he watched the two stallion enemies join battle. He saw the stocky old dull-gray stallion swap ends and drive sharp battering blows at the chestnut's barrel.

Rawlin raised his gun as Wela buckled at the knees, but the young one rose, whipped to one side, then swapped. His own hoofs flew like pistons and the sounds of impact drummed hollowly against the rugged rock faces. The oldster was down and, his eyes flamed as Wela rose and struck. His forehoofs worked with trip-hammer force and precision.



The old usurper staggered to his feet. He was weak on his legs now, yet he attempted to rise, to meet another attack by his younger rival, only to be beaten. His timing was poor, and Wela caught him with a terrific barrage in the chest. When he lowered his head, the young stallion drove a savage blow to the head and then another one.

The old one was being forced back, with Wela rising and striking, and then suddenly the chestnut whipped about and let fly with his rear hoofs.

Tom Rawlin started forward, gasping. He shut his eyes when he heard a hoarse scream as the oldster spun out over the rimrock to crash to the rock strewn bottom of the canyon.

Almost at the lip of the plateau's rim, Wela stood swaying, mincing, as soapy foam flecked from his lathered, steaming flanks.

Now he stepped back, and wheeled. Old Naka was coming in through a defile, snuffling hoarsely to her son, and then Naka saw the strange filly and rushed to drive the little sorrel crashing through the brush.

The watching man craned his neck, swallowing sharply with misgiving for his filly. But soon the old mare turned to mince toward the chestnut, as one by one the wild band members came timorously to the plateau.

Wela stamped his hoofs and tossed his head from side to side, almost rocking Naka from her feet. He moved off alone and flung his head high to pour out a majestic cry of victory, and of majesty. . . . There was no longer counter-challenge, save that which echoed and re-echoed from the scored draws and rocky walls of the wild and brush-studded mountain range.

Wela swung and snuffled hoarsely. In turn, old Naka wheeled and squeezed on past the band members, calling softly as she led off.

Wela stood immobile for long moments before he turned, whinnied softly to the little sorrel filly and hazed her on in the trail of the wild band.

The shadows of purple night slowly engulfed them and the man slid down to the plateau, to stand listening to the drum of the receding hoofbeats. He shook his head slowly, then he smiled as he realized that Wela belonged by right of conquest at the head of the wild band.

Suddenly there came again that ringing bugle. It was a cry that registered challenge and warning. It proclaimed the coronation of a rimrock king—Wela, the son of Notwe.

Sighing, the horse hunter turned and moved on down a slope to his pony tied in the brush at the bottom of a draw. Shortly he was riding off, leaving the rimrock country and the hinterland to Wela, the wild king. ●

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THE DRIFT FENCE

All the ranch believed prize-winning rider Jim Stanton preferred the rodeo circuit to the tough work of ranching— until he attempted to toss his lariat on a ranch and a lass!

A Novelet by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

CHAPTER I

Back Home

IT WAS good to be back home in Singletree. It had been three years this trip, but the lone street looked cheerful on this frosty November morning. The prairie and the buttes had color and snap to them, and the high haze hid the early snowcaps of the distant mountains. The deer up there would be good hunting. And there was Sarah Lockhart waiting for him. He savored the pleasure that would be hers when she learned of the surprise he had for her.

"Sarah, Sarah!" he cried. "It's Jim! You're all right now —do you hear, all right!"

This was home; this was good country. A man with ambition and a little money in his pocket could make a showing here where there was room to expand.

Lean and clean-cut and on the optimistic side of thirty, Jim Stanton stood on the porch of Latham's store and watched the town come alive. He jingled a few coins in his tailor-made riding pants and dwelt happily on the fifty-two hundred dollars of rodeo prize money snuggling in a moneybelt inside his handstitched shirt.

Latham came out of the store and hung some harness up on the outside display pegs, then turned and peered at him. It was good to see people you know, and Stanton spoke to him. The gaunt old man looked at him over his glasses for a moment before recognizing him.

"Oh, young Stanton, ain't you? How're you? Come back for deer hunting?"

"No! Getting old. Came back home to die," Stanton grinned at him.

"All of twenty-five, ain't you?" the old man answered. "What's the matter? Rodeo getting too tame for you?"

"No. Just tired of drifting. Thought I'd pick me up a little herd and settle down. Nothing like a man having a wife and a home of his own."

The gray old man shook his head pessimistically. "Ain't no time to do it now," he observed. "Drought all summer and ain't no graze to speak of, and hay is going higher'n an eagle's nest. Be a hard winter."

Stanton laughed. Latham was a sound businessman, but he always foresaw the worst. "Don't know where I could pick up a good place cheap?" Stanton asked him.

"You'll be able to buy 'em a dime a dozen before spring."

"I mean now."

"No, can't say I do." He scratched his jaw. "Tell you, son. Why don't you get a job of work, and kind of wait things out? No use to hurry, way things are now."

"I don't know," Stanton said, by way of brushing off the suggestion.

"Tell you what," Latham added. "See Old Joe Dill, down at the hotel. He's looking for somebody to run his place this winter. That'd give you a chance to look around."

"What's the matter with him running it himself?" Stanton asked, remembering the fiery little old Dill's reputation as a hard man to work for.

"All stove up. Broke his hip last spring, and he was already twisted out of shape with arthritis. He has to go south to New Mexico for the winter. You might look him up. Well, glad I saw you. Got to get busy." Latham went back into his store.

The storekeeper's talk somehow dampened Stanton's pleasure. He shrugged. When he told Sarah what he had in mind, her own pleasure would soon lift his spirits again. She would be happy when she learned that he'd turned over a new leaf a year ago, and had saved his money all summer, and was ready to marry her and settle down.

He jingled the coins in his pocket and walked down to the saddleshop where Gus Lindstrom was half-soling a pair of boots. Gus was glad to see him, and they said a few words.

"I want a pair of work boots, Gus," he said. "These I've got on cost me seventy-five dollars, and there's no use in wearing them out working in them. I'm going to have to save my money."

Gus laughed. "What do you mean, you going to work and saving money?"

"Yep," Stanton said, feeling a touch of pride. "Through drifting. Getting me a herd and settling down."

"Don't try to kid your uncle," Gus laughed. "There's no grandstand out on the summer range, and winter work would interfere with your hunting."

He had sensed this disbelief in his stability in Latham's talk, and now here it was again from another friend. It shot a little streak of anger through him before he told himself that a year ago they would have been right. But, of course, they hadn't known that he had really cut out his playing, and had started saving his money. He couldn't explain to them that he had sensed in Sarah's letters that she was beginning to lose faith in his ever doing anything except play. None of them knew that he was serious now.

A thought that had been working in the back of his mind now came out. "What about Joe Dill?" he asked Gus. "I hear he's looking for a foreman."

"Poor old Joe," Gus said. "He just got so mean he finally poisoned himself. Don't tell me you're thinking of going to work for him?"

"Heard he wanted a manager."

"What do you know about managing a ranch?"

"I'll match my riding with any man on this range. Or roping, or—"

"Or fishing or hunting," Gus finished. "Well, don't haul off and make Dill any richer if he turns his place over to you."

"You go to hell," Stanton said, and ruffled Gus' hair on his way out.

He did not feel quite as playful as the gesture suggested. He was beginning to get the drift of things now. His hometown folks pictured him as a showman—something of a freak. A rodeo rider who could entertain a grandstand full of people, but not a man who could buckle down to serious work. Well, in all honesty, he had to admit that maybe that was all they saw to him. He had had his fun, and he hadn't taken things too seriously—up until he sensed that he was coming close to losing Sarah.

But now it was different, and a moment's thought told him that old Latham

probably was right. If he were going to settle down, it might be a good idea to spend a season managing Dill's ranch while he was looking for a place of his own. It would give him a chance to prove himself. It would show his friends around here that he meant business—and it would be a convincer to tack onto his argument this afternoon when he went out to tell Sarah that she was practically married to a promising young cattleman.

STANTON found Joe Dill up in a front room at the hotel, and the old man growled what might have passed for a greeting from the rocking chair in which he sat impatiently looking out the window. The dried-up little rancher's chin whiskers were in a constant quiver, and his sharp eyes, now sunk deep with suffering, were as aggressive as Stanton had remembered them.

Stanton said a few words about being sorry for Dill's accident, and Dill brushed off the sympathy impatiently. "I'll get along," he snapped. "Don't need nobody to be sorry for me. What did you want to see me about?"

"Heard you were going down into New Mexico for the winter, and needed a foreman. I'm going to be around, and I thought I might take over for you while you were gone, if it would help you out."

The old man rubbed his knotted fingers. "You been following the rodeos, haven't you?"

"Yes, but I'm through with that now. I'll be around here for a while. I could run your place—"

"No!" the old man snapped. "You couldn't run my place. It takes a man with experience—"

Dill's gruffness snapped the reins of Stanton's temper. "What do you mean? I've ridden this range all my life. I know every butte and canyon in it—"

"Sure! Sure!" the old man interrupted. "You can ride a horse, standing up or standing on your head. I don't doubt it. And you ought to know every butte and gully around here, you've played over 'em enough. But I ain't looking for a man to ride my horses standing on his head, nor to rope and tie my steers in sixteen seconds. What I want is a man that knows how to pull beef through the winter. You wouldn't know anything about that angle of it."

Jim clamped his jaws and turned to leave the room.

Dill shouted after him, "I'll be needing some extra riders, though. You could do that, all right."

Stanton slammed the door as he went out without answering.

He went down and found a restaurant and had his noon meal, speaking to a few more of the people he knew. He had once been one of them, but he saw now that they were busy with their own affairs, and he was not one of them. Well, they'd find out soon enough. Wait till he and Sarah were married, and he found the place he wanted. When they saw how he'd changed, they'd really believe him.

After dinner he went down to the livery and rented a horse and started down the Red Butte road to the Lockharts. Sarah would cure the feeling of dissatisfaction that was growing in him. After all, it was only Sarah who mattered, Sarah and a home of his own. And riding down this twisting road in the middle of a cool bright afternoon was like old times. The red flat-topped buttes were old friends, the mountains with their tops hidden in a low haze were symbols of security. When he pulled up in front of the neat and substantial Lockhart ranch he had recaptured his old mood of eagerness and optimism.

It was Sarah herself who came to the front door when he pulled up and called out, and he had to sit in his saddle for a moment and feast his eyes on the slender beauty of this girl he'd always known. Her corn-colored hair made a crown of tight ringlets around her head, and her eyes still had the stars in the glistening blue of their depths.

"Why, Jim!" she exclaimed, and came across the porch to welcome him. "Get off that horse and let me see you." There was surprise and a genuine pleasure in

her voice which drove the last remaining clouds out of Stanton's mind. Here he was appreciated; here he should have come first instead of lingering around town. He slid out of saddle and took both her arms in his hands.

"Well," he said, "you look as though you don't believe it's me. Here I am, and here I stay. Honey, you are looking at an old ex-rodeo rider, but an up-and-coming young rancher, all in the same look."

SARAH looked at him gravely. "What do you mean?" she asked. "You've bought a ranch?"

"Well," he answered haltingly. "I haven't bought one yet, but I thought I would, just as soon as you and I get married. We can both pick it out."

He saw a dubious look on her face. It reminded him how his friends had shown their disbelief in him in one way or another. And now Sarah! A streak of impatience ran through him, but he fought it down. "What do you say?" he asked, to cover the moment of silence.

"Why, Jim, I wish you hadn't put it just that way. There's so much to think of."

"What?"

"Why, lots of things. A person doesn't just take a notion to start a ranch, and go out and buy one and go ahead from there."

"Then just how does a man go into the ranching business?"

"You don't go into it," she answered. "You grow into it. There's a whole lot to knowing how to run a ranch."

A little flame of anger grew. "I've been hearing something like that all morning," he answered. "What's the matter with me having a ranch? You might have forgotten, but I was raised on a ranch about four miles down the road there. Remember? And I know how to ride horses and everything."

It was pure irony. They had played and ridden together from the time they had been old enough to sit on horses, and their fathers had been lifelong friends and neighbors. And somehow, both their families and they themselves had just assumed that in the course of events they would marry. That was the way it had been, and now there was something wrong. He was beginning to feel that there must long have been a conspiracy of silence about him, a conviction held by the whole range that because he had been carefree and daredevil, and had gone to follow the rodeos instead of buckling down to steady work on the home place, he wasn't worth much. It hurt; it made him angry.

"Jim, please!" she pleaded. "Don't be like that. I'm just asking you not to fly off onto another wild idea like you're always doing. Ranching is not play, it's hard work, and you have to have the experience to meet the problems that come up. Why don't you get a job for a while, learn the business side of ranching. Later, when you've saved the money and have had enough experience to take the risk, then start in a small way and build up."

He was on the verge of taking out his moneybelt and flicking the fifty-two hundred-dollar bills under her nose, but anger held him back. She had often spoken of his carelessness with money, and he had saved his money this year as a big surprise for her. But she had spoiled that now by her doubts of his ability. It was like turning the knife and he was really angry now.

"Well," he said, trying to force an impersonal dignity into his tone, "you have been wanting me to settle down for years. And so I gave up a pretty good thing in rodeo to do exactly what you wanted me to do. I came home full of plans to settle down and get married and live the life you wanted me to. But it seems that you don't have enough confidence in me. I suppose that you wouldn't want to get married until after you'd seen me perform the duties of a sixty-a-month cowhand for a season or so—just to prove that I was worthy of you?"

"I think you're still playing," she snapped. "You think it would be fun to play rancher for a while, and you want me to play it with you. Well, I've seen enough

ranching to realize just how serious a business it is, and if you don't mind, I'll wait until I see some of that seriousness in you."

His hurt pride made him brittle. "All right. Just forget I said anything about it. I'm sorry I disturbed you with all my crazy ideas."

He turned stiffly and threw himself onto his horse, and turned down the road toward his old home place. He had a sudden notion to take one look at it, and then ride out of the country for good. Nobody here believed in him.

The girl stood a moment looking at his back. Her lips were trembling and there was a suggestion of tears in her eyes. She turned back into her house.

CHAPTER II

Pattern of Disapproval

APPROACHING his home place did not allay any of Stanton's anger, for it was here that the trouble had really started. His father had set the pattern of disapproval with his impatience at Jim's not buckling down to the drudgery which the old man believed to be the secret of success. This difference of opinion between strong-willed men had eventually caused a break between them when Jim first started following the rodeos. The old man, later crippled by a fall from his horse, had sold the place to Cam Elder, and finally had died on his brother's place in Colorado.

Pulling into the yard of the old ranchhouse, Stanton was struck by its forlorn attitude of disrepair. The big ranchhouse of carefully hewn logs which had always been freshly whitewashed, looked dull and gray; there were boards missing on the barns and outhouses, and the fence wires sagged from leaning posts.

Shouting at the door, he felt his dissatisfaction deepening, and he was on the point of turning his horse and riding out when old Cam Elder came to the door.

"Howdy," Jim said. "I'm Jim Stanton. Just passing and thought I'd like to take a look at the old home place."

He remembered Elder as a quiet man who'd owned a small neat place over on the other side of town, and who was known as a hard worker. He had been one of those men whose place always looked neat because he and his wife always found something to do. The present condition of the place and of Elder himself puzzled Stanton. A gaunt old man, with one eye missing, he wore a several-days growth of gray beard, his grizzled hair was uncombed, and he looked vaguely at Stanton for a time before he finally said, "Oh, yeah. Come in."

The house was dirty inside, and Elder said, "Throw those things off that chair and sit down. Haven't cleaned up much since my wife died."

"I'm sorry," Stanton answered. "I hadn't heard about her passing. When did she die?"

"She died three years ago. Pneumonia. Finest woman that ever lived."

Elder was boiling beans for supper, firing the stove with wood cut from a saddle-shed he was tearing down, a board at a time. They talked a while, and Stanton gained the impression that Elder had not recovered from the blow of his wife's death.

"You can ride around and look at the place if you want to," Elder said as they ate. "But you won't find it too well kept up. Just ain't had the heart. I'd sell it and get out in a minute if I could find anybody that wanted it."

Stanton ate his beans without revealing the sudden inspiration that hit him. Here was his answer to Sarah and Latham and everybody else in the country. He kept his eagerness under control as he spoke.

"I was kind of halfway in a notion of picking up a place," he began guardedly. "But I don't know about this one, it's pretty well run down, and I imagine you'd want a pretty good price for it."

"I paid your dad fifteen thousand dollars for it," Elder said lifelessly. "But just to get away, I'd take twelve."

"All cash?"

"Yeah. I'd want to get clear away from here as soon as I sold it."

AFTER supper Jim went out and looked around the corrals and barns, pointing out their state of disrepair, but still showing an interest in buying. Elder sensed his interest, and became more interested in selling, dropping his asking price to ten thousand. This was what Stanton was waiting for before he played his trump card, the one he had planned to use in any event. Elder was short of money and eager to get away. He would fall for the bait.

Back in the kitchen, Stanton counted out his rodeo money and laid it on the table, retaining only two hundred dollars for personal expenses.

"Five thousand cash and a note and mortgage for the rest," he said. "That's all I've got and I'm sorry it isn't more. How about it?"

The old man's one eye gazed at the money, and then he said, "If I wasn't so unhappy here, I'd have to turn that down. But, young man, you've bought yourself a ranch."

Jim Stanton had difficulty in concealing his triumph. His mind was on Sarah, but he forced himself to say the things he had to say to get Elder's name on the line before the old man changed his mind. "You've got the abstract of title? And a mortgage and deed?"

The old man brought the thick abstract out of a cheroot box, and found some blank legal papers. Stanton examined the abstract, showing the history of the land, including his father's sale of it to Elder for fifteen thousand dollars.

They filled out the deed, note and mortgage. Elder counted the money and stuffed it into his pocket—and Jim Stanton was the owner of his old home ranch.

Elder drained his coffee cup and put on his dirty sheepskin coat like a sleepwalker. "Don't rush off," Stanton said. "Just make yourself at home like you always have."

The old man stood in the doorway and looked back at him with his one deep, haunted eye. "I've said for three years that I wouldn't stay here one minute after I sold the place. It's yours, and I'm gone. Glad I met you. So long."

"And I am more than glad I saw you," Jim Stanton said. "So long. See you again."

"Not me," the old man answered, and disappeared into the dusk in the direction of the corral.

Going out to the corral later to turn his saddle horse loose, Stanton saw the old man disappearing on the road to town. Then he looked into the gathering darkness in the direction of the Lockhart place, and smiled to himself. He turned and went into the house, pulled off his jacket and set about clearing out three years' accumulation of dirt and rubbish which old Elder had been too indifferent to take care of.

THE NEXT morning broke cold and raw, but clear, and he had an early breakfast of the food Elder had left and rode out across his acres. His acres! Two thousand acres and, according to Elder's estimate, at least five hundred cattle. Not a bad start for a young fellow who didn't have any business sense!

A small flock of geese honked out of the north and he watched them pass over. "Drift on, friends," he said with an exuberance of spirit. "I know how it is. Used to go south for the winter, myself."

Riding out over the back range he experienced the greatest feeling of well-being that he had ever known. The cold air had a bite in it, the grass was thin, and the grazing cows had little beef on them, but everything looked good to him in his pride of possession.

There was only one thought that troubled him. He needed cash. Looking over the cattle, he decided that he could use them for security for a loan of enough money to buy hay. That would be a simple business proposition that Asa Walkup at the bank would handle for him.

Red Butte Flats was a triangular piece of ground with the road running along its

base, and with two rows of buttes running at angles to make its sides, coming almost together like a funnel mouth at the north end. The whole triangle covered about five thousand acres, of which Lockhart had the west half and Stanton the east.

Stanton reached the funnel mouth at the narrow end of the triangle, and dismounted where the land dropped abruptly into a deep canyon which steered off to the south of the two rows of buttes.

At this southern boundary of the land, which ended in the canyon, his father and Lockhart years ago had erected a stout drift fence of heavy oak posts six feet apart with five rows of tightly strung barbed wire. This prevented cattle, drifting before heavy storms out of the north, from falling to their deaths in the canyon.

Stanton examined the fence. The long row of stout posts was still standing, but the weather had rotted out the staples, and the wires had dropped off to the ground, where they had lain and rusted while the grass grew up around them. And a few of the posts were rotting.

He dismounted and walked to the canyon mouth and looked down into the three-hundred-foot depth of the eroded hole. The floor of the canyon at the near point held a pile of bleached cattle bones, a few of the skeletons still tufted with patches of dried skin and hair. Elder, gone to pieces after the death of his wife, had neglected to take care of the fence, and some of his stock had drifted over the lip of the canyon to die and make a feast for wolves. Well, Stanton knew better than that. He would have new wire on that drift fence long before the first snow fell.

He rode back to the house in high spirits, picturing in his mind the pleasure he would get out of his repair work on the barns and fences, building the ranch up in his mind's eye for years to come, happy years with Sarah proudly working with him.

HE WAS surprised to see a buckboard in the backyard, and when he reached the house he recognized the two men who were coming out of the kitchen. They were Asa Walkup, the banker, and Ace Davenport, the county sheriff. He spoke to them pleasantly, a little proudly.

"Howdy, gentlemen. What can I do for you?"

He noted the odd expressions on both their faces as they looked at him. Walkup, a rotund, kindly man, said, "Not a thing. We were just looking over the property.

It Happened in 1848

IMAGINE EARNING one hundred dollars daily, on the average, at ordinary unskilled labor! That's exactly what happened in California, in 1848, when gold was discovered. But the men who worked the mines that year, and dug out more than five millions in gold dust, weren't the only ones who made themselves a living on a grandiose scale.

Real estate operators did very well also, according to the records of the rents that they charged. A cellar, for example, that was six feet deep and twelve square, went for $250 a month. A one-story building with an approximate frontage of twenty feet, was good for $40,000 annually, which was the same price charged and cheerfully paid by a group of gamblers who operated the "Eldorado," a 15x25 foot canvas tent.

Laborers who weren't engaged in mining activities also earned fabulous salaries. And this brand new topsy-turvy land of gold-dust opportunity wasn't rich in cash alone—it was lavish with courtesy. No one would think of yelling for a waiter by that name, in any one of the overpriced restaurants. Instead the word "steward" was used, because, who knew, the man who was engaged in serving you might very well have been a lawyer or other important professional back East only a few short months before.

—*BESS RITTER*

Used to belong to your father, didn't it, Stanton? Just looking over the old home place before you leave?"

Stanton smiled. "I'm not going away again. I've just bought the place from Cam Elder. I'm going to fix it until it won't look like the same ranch."

Walkup frowned. "There must be something wrong, Stanton. We've just taken over the place."

"But you couldn't be taking it. I bought it from Elder last night. Got the abstract and the deed and everything."

Walkup rubbed his chin. "Mind letting me see them?"

Stanton took them into the kitchen and showed them the thick abstract and the new deed. Walkup studied the papers, then slid them over the table to the sheriff who looked them over and shook his head. "I'm afraid, son, that you've been taken in. Elder couldn't sell you this place."

"Why not? There's the evidence of the sale. The abstract shows that he bought it from my father, doesn't it? And the deed shows that I bought it from him. What's wrong with that?"

"Did you go down to the abstract office and see if his title was clear?" the banker asked.

"Why, no. The abstract shows the ownership, doesn't it?"

"There's your trouble. The abstract was just brought down to the date of the sale of the property to Elder. It doesn't show that Elder had the property mortgaged to the bank for four thousand dollars. If you'd had the title examined before you bought the property, you'd have learned that the property was mortgaged."

"You mean I'll have to pay off a mortgage of his?"

Walkup shook his head. "I'm afraid it's worse than that, son. You see, for the last three years, Elder hadn't paid even the interest on his mortgage. So the bank had to sue for a judgment. The court granted it, and ordered a sheriff's sale, set for today. I came out with Ace, and since there were no other bidders, I bought the ranch in for the amount of the debt. It was a court sale, Stanton, and I'm afraid it is legal. I'm sorry. The bank doesn't want to take anybody's property away from them, but it has to protect its depositors."

"Let me see that court order," Stanton answered. Something dry was sticking in his throat, and his mind was in a whirl. He was searching desperately for some trick in Walkup's story. But he knew Walkup was an honest man, and somehow down deep inside him he knew that Walkup was telling him the truth.

He glanced almost unseeingly through the papers, noting the mortgage and note and the judgment and court order. He tossed the papers back on the table and got to his feet. "You may be right," he said. "I'll see."

Walkup picked up the papers and spoke kindly. "Just get yourself a lawyer and have him show you the records at the courthouse, Stanton. I don't like this business any more than you do, but the bank had forty-seven hundred dollars tied up in the place, which I had to protect. We didn't want the place, we only wanted our money. If you'd checked on your title before you bought, then you would have known about this matter, and you could have bought the place in legally. For less than you gave in cash, as a matter of fact."

Stanton looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"You gave five thousand and your note for another five. If you'd checked on the title before you bought, you'd have seen that there was this forty-seven hundred dollar debt against it, and you could have been here and bought the place in for the amount of the debt. I wouldn't have bid against you, so long as I got our money out of it. Then you'd have owned the place free of indebtedness for less than you gave as a down payment. See what I mean?"

Stanton leaned against the wall, his anger at himself making him weak.

Walkup said, "Stick around as long as you want, of course. As a matter of fact, we'll have to have a man to look after the place. If you'd be interested in the job—"

"I didn't come here to take any sixty-dollar riding job," Stanton answered angrily. "And I'll be busy finding Cam Elder."

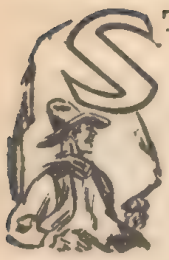
"Then you'd better hurry," Davenport said. "Somebody saw him riding over the mountain on the Willow Gulch road. There's a gold boom over at Gulch now, and money can melt mighty fast there."

Stanton picked up his abstract and deed and stuffed them into his pocket. "I'm going to find that hombre and stuff these down his throat if it takes me the rest of my life," he promised, and walked out of the house which for a few hours he had claimed as his own.

He rode to town completely immersed in his anger at Elder, and he was almost abreast the Lockhart place before he knew it. Then his anger became mixed with humiliation at his own mistake. He thought of the Indians who in battle slid down over their horses' sides to hide themselves from their enemies. He wished that he could thus hide as he rode past Sarah's home.

CHAPTER III

The Coffin in the Store



STANTON reached town late in the afternoon and told Dick Harley, the lawyer, his story. Harley went with him to the courthouse and they checked the records. When they had finished, Harley gave him the news. "You haven't got a leg to stand on, Jim. Walkup's claim is airtight. Your only chance for relief is from Elder. If we can find him and get him in jail before he's spent the money, you might get it back."

"Elder headed for Willow Gulch, Ace told me. And I'm headed for there right now. I'll find him if I have to chase him to the Mexican Border."

The cold was biting deeper now, and the sky was gray. It would be still colder crossing the mountains. Stanton bought a sheep-lined canvas coat and a pair of levis which he put on over his broadcloth riding pants. He changed horses at the livery stable and set out on the trail to Willow Gulch.

By dark, he was at the foot of the mountains, and by the time the full moon came up he was climbing higher. The air grew colder—and his mood grew blacker. He had plenty of time now to face facts. He was not as good as he thought he was. The only thing that he had possessed was a supreme overconfidence in himself, and an abysmal ignorance of business.

He rode on through the night, cold and tired, keeping himself awake by examining his own defects. He was beginning to doubt if he could do anything except ride a horse. Standing on his head, he added ironically. Quite an asset in running a ranch!

As the moon set and the sky in the east began to lighten into a cold gray, he was coming down the far slope, and geese were honking. He looked at the sky, and it was literally filled with them. One flight after another, as far to the north as he could see, and to the east and to the west, all heading south. As he reached the foot of the mountain after daylight, and saw the ragged town of Willow Gulch on Willow Creek ahead of him, the geese were still coming in countless numbers. He had seen such an occurrence only once before in his life.

JIM RODE into the boomtown in the early cold of the morning, and it was hard to recognize what had once been a sleepy little cow settlement. Rag tents and pine shacks, tin affairs, anything that would house a human being, all were thrown helterskelter along the banks of the creek, spreading out in every direction.

He found a restaurant where he could thaw out and get some breakfast. When he had finished jostling prospectors and paid a dollar for a cup of coffee and a pair of eggs, he asked the proprietor where he could find the town marshal.

"Here he comes now," the man said. "Hey, Joe. Fellow wants to see you."

The marshal was a tall sad-looking man wearing a drooping mustache and a gun showing signs of service.

"I'm from over at Singletree," Stanton explained, and showed the officer the warrant he had brought along. "Wonder if you've seen anything of this man. Name of Cam Elder. He headed this way about twenty-four hours before I did."

"We've got three thousand strangers around here," the marshal said wearily. "Maybe he showed up, I wouldn't know. Wouldn't be much chance of finding out unless you just accidentally run into him. What did he look like?"

"Tall and lean, graying black hair and stubble of a beard. Wearing faded bib overalls and a greasy black hat. Oh, yes, and he had only one eye."

"Oh, now," the marshal answered. "That's better. Sure, he came in yesterday morning."

Stanton had the first feeling of hope that he had experienced since he had left the ranch. "Is he still around?" he asked.

"Yeah," the marshal answered. "Come on."

His spirits rising, Stanton followed the officer out of the restaurant and into the general store across the street. They went between rows of merchandise and into a small back room empty except for a long pine box on a pair of trestles in the center.

"That him?" the marshal asked.

Stanton was silent a long moment. "Yes. That's him."

Cam Elder lay dead in the pine coffin on the trestles.

After a long moment of silence while he stood paralyzed he asked, "How'd he get killed?"

"Like all the damned fools. He breezed into town yesterday morning flashing a roll of hundred-dollar bills that would choke a mule. Started buying drinks for anybody that would drink with him, hitting the dice games and blowing off his mouth. Bragging that it was his first drink in thirty years. He was sure making up for lost time. You know what was bound to happen. We found him this morning out back of a bunch of those shacks with his head bashed in and his pockets turned wrongside out. Didn't have a pocketknife or a plug of tobacco on him. It happens all the time around here."

"I was just wondering," Stanton said. "There wouldn't be much of a chance finding out who did it?"

"Not a chance. It's all we can do to pick 'em up and bury 'em, much less finding out who killed 'em. Hope it wasn't anything serious you wanted him for?"

"Oh," Stanton said quietly. "Just a matter of a little land."

He took the warrant out of his pocket and tore it in half, and tossed it along with his hopes into the coffin with the body of Cam Elder. Despite the money, he felt sick at heart over the old man. He turned and went out with the officer.

They stood a moment in front of the store, and the officer looked up into the sky and said, "Never seen the like of geese. Been passing over constant ever since around midnight. Hard winter coming, I reckon."

"Yeah," Stanton said absently. "A hard winter. I'll see you again."

RIDING OUT, he reached the fork of the trail; the main road went on to the south, while the trail over the mountains turned off to the left. He stopped his horse here at the crossroads and looked up at the geese. He could ride straight on out of the country just as the geese were doing, and leave the evidence of his bad judgment behind him. And leave Sarah behind, to hear the story and be convinced that she had judged him rightly. But he could never ride far enough to escape consciousness of his own failure.

He looked up at the geese, gave them a salute, and turned his horse toward the mountain pass. . . .

He stabled his horse in Singletree in the middle of the afternoon and went directly to the bank, where he found Asa Walkup. He sat down and laid his abstract on Walkup's desk.

"You might as well take that," he said. "I won't be needing it, and it'll save you the price of having another one made up."

"I'm sorry about this, Stanton," Walkup said. "I hope you don't have any hard feelings about it. The bank doesn't want ranches, it wants successful ranchers."

"It was my mistake."

"I take it you didn't find Elder?"

Stanton told the banker what he had learned, and Walkup shook his head. "I was wondering about him. He was pretty wild when he was a young fellow, until a schoolteacher took him in hand and married him. I figure she just kept him in line until she died, and then he fell apart again."

"About that job you offered me before. I'd like to make you a counteroffer," Jim said.

"What is it?"

"You've got property out there that's run down and needs putting in shape. You've got five hundred head of cattle on it that won't be there if there's not somebody looking after them all the time. Here's the deal: I'll go out and run that ranch for living expenses and half the profits. You buy the supplies and my grocery bill, and I'll take care of the cattle. When we sell, you'll credit my account with my share of the profit. When I've paid the bank what the place cost you, plus interest from now on, you give me a deed to the place."

Walkup said guardedly, "I thought you were a rodeo man. There's a lot of hard work—"

"I was a rodeo man. Now I'm going to be a rancher whether I get this deal or have to work out a ranch somewhere else. I know cattle, and I'll have the benefit of your business judgment. Between the two of us, we can make that ranch pay."

"I was thinking of just getting a man for wages," Walkup countered.

"You do and you won't have any cattle by spring. I can tell you now that you're up against something that I'd bet you don't foresee."

"You tell me something I don't foresee, and I'll call you on that deal."

"All right. What's going to happen to those cattle within maybe a week?" Stanton asked.

"Why, nothing that I know of. What will happen?"

"A lot of them will be lying on the ground frozen to death. A lot more of them will be dead at the bottom of that canyon, food for wolves and coyotes. The fence is down, you know. You won't have much, if any, of them left in a few weeks from now."

"That's a dire prophecy, Stanton. What makes you think so?"

"Because you're going to have a blizzard here in the next few days that might come close to matching the one that hit here nine years ago. Remember it?"

"Sure. But what makes you think so?"

"Seen any geese yet?"

"A couple of flights."

"Well, every goose in Canada has packed his satchel in a hurry and started south, all at once. Ordinarily, geese work their way down in small flights before small cold spells. But once in a while a big batch of weather boils up somewhere up north, and they all take out all of a sudden. They're doing that now."

"So?"

"I was out hunting nine years ago, over on the other side of the mountains, when the same thing happened. The Indian I was hunting with told me when we saw the geese that it was a sure sign of a hard, early blizzard. And you know what happened then. His people had known that always, and the sign had never failed. So, we're going to have a blizzard here within a few days."

"Hum," Walkup said. "And there's no hay out there."

Walkup slapped his desk with the folded abstract. "You've got yourself a deal, Stanton," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Send out a dozen rolls of new heavy gauge barbed wire and a keg of staples, a pair of fence-stretchers and post-hole diggers. And then I want hay, lots of it, and quick."

Walkup thought a minute. "You're putting a lot of faith in a flock of wild geese. But we'll have to have the hay anyway, so I suppose there's nothing for

us to lose."

"I'm the one that's taking the risk," Stanton answered. "I wouldn't take the job if you didn't go along with me on this. And I'll look like a worse fool than I've already been if I'm wrong."

"Okay, I'll get moving."

"And I'll need a month's groceries."

"You must think this storm you're expecting is going to be a stemwinder."

"I do," Stanton answered. "I'm gambling on it."

"I want to tell you something, Stanton," Walkup said. "You might have been sore at me about this business, and you could have cost me a lot of money by just keeping your mouth shut about that canyon and the drift fence being down. I won't forget that."

"Forget it," Stanton answered. "It wasn't your fault. It just cost me that much to learn that I wasn't as smart as I thought I was. And if I'm wrong now, I'm still not smart enough to run a ranch."

CHAPTER IV

The Storm Breaks

JIM STANTON rode home, not looking toward Sarah's house as he passed, but feeling for the first time that she had shown a greater wisdom than he had ever had. He felt humble now instead of angry, and he could no longer blame her for her lack of faith in him. But he also felt an old obstinacy in himself; he had set out to make a ranch of his father's place, and he meant to do it, even though he would be working right next door to her, so that every time they accidentally saw each other it would be a reminder to them both of how right she had been and how wrong he had been. It would be embarrassing for a long time to come, but he would not back down.

He had a team and wagon down on the creek at daylight, and he cut a load of new heavy posts to replace the rotted ones at the drift fence. By the time he arrived at the lip of the canyon, a man was there with his wire and fencing tools.

"What is the idea of getting all panic-stricken," the storekeeper's driver asked. "They're telling it around the feed barn that you expect the Ice Age to return."

"It might," Stanton answered shortly. "Just drop that wire off at the other end of this fence line, will you? And dump the diggers and stretchers here."

Although there was a cold bite to the air, the day was clear and sunny, with no warnings of bad weather, and he had no intention of laying himself open to more criticism by trying to argue his convictions.

It was hard digging in the dry ground, but by the time the first big rack of hay arrived he had half a dozen of the rotted posts replaced. He had to stop his work and show men where he wanted his hay piles, and he had to counter and evade more comment about his panicky preparations for a blizzard in a month when there was rarely even a flurry of snow, and in the face of a cloudless sky.

The day wore on and he got his new posts in by the middle of the afternoon, and started stringing his top wire, stopping at intervals and directing the unloading of eight more racks of hay. The wire stringing was slow business for a man working alone.

He had to fasten the wire at one end of the fence, then roll the heavy spool on the ground the length of the fence, pushing it along and unreeling it with his foot. Then he had to fasten the stretchers to the free end, mount his horse and stretch the wire fiddle-string tight, dismount while the horse held the slack, lock the stretchers, then begin his walk back, stapling the wire to the posts. He got the second line on by night, and nine tons of hay were stacked in eighteen half-ton stacks checkerboarded like a series of pillboxes at fifty-foot intervals in front of the drift fence.

On his way back to the house just before sundown, he stopped off at the creek and cut up the limbs of the trees he had felled for posts, and hauled them up to

the house. After a bite to eat, he lit a lantern and chopped wood and stacked it in the kitchen until he was exhausted. The big boxes of groceries had been left in the middle of the kitchen floor and he was too tired to move them. . . .

The next morning was the same as the day before, clear and cold. The hay-wagons kept coming, and the drivers and helpers kept asking him what was holding up his blizzard. Stanton gave them short answers and finished ruining his seventy-five dollar boots on the rolls of barbed wire. As an afterthought, he cut off four stacks of hay from the rest by erecting a small three-wire fence around them. This was his reserve, to be opened only as a last resort.

He finished at about sundown and looked over his handiwork. Now he had forty small stacks of hay checkerboarded in front of the drift fence, and the cold and hungry cattle could hardly miss them. They would stop here to eat, and the hay was scattered sufficiently so that all of the stock could get to it.

He was limp with weariness, but he was satisfied with his preparations. He could do no more.

He looked at the sun, and it was setting clear and silver. There was no low haze, there were no high gray clouds. Any old-timer would have told him that only a miracle could have brought a norther along in time to justify his frantic haste.

He went by the creek for another load of wood, and turned in to sleep an hour after sundown, after taking one last look at the clear, star-studded sky.

A GREAT blast of wind awoke him from his drugged sleep, and he sat up and listened. The storm had descended with the sudden fury of a tumbling avalanche. He heard it howling through the bare branches of the tall sycamore outside the house, setting its giant limbs to moaning like the deep notes of a bass fiddle.

The angry blizzard prowled about the thick walls of his house like a raging lion, licking its tongues of icy cold into the cracks under the doors, rattling the windows with a savage anger. He heard boards ripped off the half-demolished saddle shed and furiously slammed to the ground. The icy blast sucked the warm air out of his house through the fireplace chimney and icy air came in through the cracks.

Stanton got up and by lamplight built a roaring fire in the stone fireplace. The coffee left from his supper was frozen in the pot, and he set it by the fireplace to heat. The tin clock on the kitchen table showed him that it was three o'clock in the morning.

The blizzard was here, just as the geese had foretold, and he was vindicated in his action. He was on the point of taking some satisfaction for his good judgment when the realization of the death and destruction that would come in its wake sobered him. This range would see dead cattle by the hundreds, for it would have caught most of the ranchers unprepared. He drank his bitter coffee and listened to the rising gale.

Daylight came gray and bleak and he went out to feed the few horses in the corral, cracking the ice from the water pond with an axe. And now a fine dry snow began sifting before the wind, coming straight out of the north, and the snow swept over the ground with the hissing sound of blowing sand. The temperature was still dropping, and when he got back to the house it was below the zero mark. He looked out across the range, and those cattle that were in sight already had their backs to the wind. It would be a long time before they turned around again.

The snow increased rapidly, and by noon the ground was solid white, and the air so thick with it that his vision was cut to less than fifty feet.

Unable to be still, having nothing that he could lay a hand to, he went out to the barns and looked things over, out of pure restlessness. He found an old pair of stiff wornout leather chaps and a motheaten old fur cap hanging on a peg in a feed room. He tried the old cap on, and took it along with him. It was a far

cry from his fifty-dollar Stetson, but it was warm.

This was a strange hissing white world now where he could not see ten feet before him, and he made his way back to the house by heading directly into the wind. In the middle of the afternoon he became restless again and dived into the white hell of the norther to drag the second load of wood into the barn and chop it up into fireplace lengths.

The temperature was still dropping and the snow increasing. The blizzard was settling down for a long siege against the unprepared ranchers. There would be hundreds of snowy mounds on the range before this was over, mounds marking the spot where cattle fell and died and waited for the ranchers to come along with their skinning knives and salvage their hides from their carcasses.

UNTIL dusk Stanton chopped wood in his barn, and then started toward his house, guiding himself through the hissing snow only by facing directly into it. Then he stopped short and listened. He heard the cry again, a voice coming from somewhere in the graying white void. A shout. He answered, and heard the shout again, and it continued thus until the form of a man on horseback emerged from the enveloping snow.

Stanton rushed to him, and caught his bridle reins. The man almost fell out of his saddle, and Stanton gave him support to keep him on his feet.

The man was old Bob Lockhart, Sarah's father. His whiskers were frosted with snow and his lips were blue and trembling. His eyes had an almost vacant stare.

"Come on," Stanton urged. "Get in the house and get warm."

"Can't," the old man murmured vaguely. "Got to find Sarah."

"What happened to Sarah?" Stanton was guiding the old man toward the house and as he asked the question a great fear seized him.

"Went out to look for me," the old man said.

Stanton held back the questions that he wanted to ask, until he got the old man into the house and filled him with hot coffee.

"Now tell me what happened," he demanded.

Lockhart sat hovering before the fireplace washing his dry hands together and poking them almost into the blaze. He was old and not too strong, and Stanton saw that he was in bad shape. Talking slowly as though he were having difficulty remembering, he said:

"When the blizzard hit this morning I remembered that Elder had let that drift fence go down. I loaded wire on a wagon and went out to fix it. Got there and found out that it had already been fixed. But by that time the snow was so deep that I couldn't get the wagon back to the house. I unhitched and rode one of the horses, but the snow was coming so hard I couldn't find the house. Got lost. Milled around for hours before I found it.

"Sarah had got worried about me, and left a note saying she was out looking for me, and if I came in to stay there, that she'd be all right. Storm kept getting worse, so I went out looking for her, and couldn't find her. Can't see a thing, snow's so thick. I just kept milling around and calling, and finally bumped into you. I got to find her before dark. I'll get warm and move on."

"Let me get your boots off," Jim said. "Your feet will get warm quicker that way." He knelt down and removed the old man's boots.

He kept the boots while he put on his gloves and buttoned up his coat. "Now listen, Mr. Lockhart," he said. "You're not able to go out. After you get thawed out, you crawl into my bed and take care of yourself. I'll go find Sarah."

"Can't do it!" the old man mumbled. "I've got to find her."

"You're not fit to go, and you're not going." Stanton lifted the boots. "See? I'm taking these, and you can't go out in this blizzard barefooted. Now settle down like I tell you, and I'll have Sarah here in no time."

HE DID not wait to hear the old man's protest to its end, but opened the door against the howling wind and went out to his barn, where he saddled his horse and turned his tail into the wind. Daylight was beginning to fade now, but there was no letup in the hissing, driving snow. A man could get lost between his house and his barn.

He could not see around him, but he had only to let the horse drift before the wind. In an hour it was dark and his horse was among the cattle at the drift fence. He saw their dark forms and heard their bawling. As he rode among them he saw that they had tramped the snow off his haystacks and were collected in small bunches, eating and keeping their tails to the storm.

His strategy had worked. There were no cattle against the drift fence, and there would be no fresh bodies of dead cows in the canyon below.

But his mind was not on triumphant satisfaction. Sarah was somewhere around here looking for her father, and he had to find her. In the darkness and in the howl of the wind and the hiss of the snow, a voice would not carry far. But he shouted as he rode and searched for her; he shouted as he had never before shouted in his life. And the wind whipped his voice away as though it were nothing. He saw telltale mounds where a few undernourished calves had succumbed to the cold, and he approached each one with dread.

And then after a long while he found her horse with its reins dragging, and the agonies of hell went through him. He pulled up to one of the haystacks and tried to drive the cattle away from it. They wouldn't budge. He pushed his horse through them up to the stack, then slid off and dug matches out of his pockets. He dug away some snow and fired the stack.

The tiny flame ate into the hay slowly, making a dim light and throwing out little wisps of yellow smoke. The wind whipped the little blaze, and it licked and melted tufts of snow which sizzled into water and tried to put the fire out.

The little fire fought for its life, and grew slowly and smokily, and its red glow ate deeper into the pile of hay. And then finally a big tongue of flame leaped triumphantly out of the stack, ate away the snow in its path and burst into a full-blown fire.

The blaze made an eerie pink reflection against the curtain of falling snow, but it blossomed out larger and larger as the tongues of flame ignored the storm and rose high in the night.

The blaze couldn't be seen very far against the curtain of falling snow, but it was all he could do. Stanton began circling the burning stack spirally and renewed his shouting. And each time that he stopped to examine one of the small mounds of white which hid some victim of the storm, his heart stopped beating.

ALL SENSE of time had left him, and the cold had bit so deeply that he was numb. He was not conscious of himself nor of his own discomfort. He was conscious of nothing but the torture in him, and of the need to find the girl without whom, he knew now, he had no desire to live.

He turned from another dead calf and started to remount his horse when he heard the faint voice. And then, as his heart leaped into his mouth, he saw a snow-covered figure stagger and fall. The light of the burning haystack was so dim here that he couldn't make her out clearly, but he dropped his horse's reins and rushed to her. He saw the figure get to its feet—and fall again.

His frozen feet seemed heavy and lifeless, but he managed to reach her and lift her up in his arms.

"Sarah! Sarah!" he cried. "It's Jim! You're all right now! Do you hear? You're all right!"

She had on jeans and a heavy coat, and her head was wrapped in a thick wool shawl, all encrusted with snow. Her eyes were sunken and she looked at him without recognition.

Finally she said, "Oh," as though she

recognized him. And at the same moment, the little remaining strength seemed to drain from her. She would have sunk to the ground if he had not been supporting her.

"Try to stay on your feet," he shouted at her. "You've got to hold on just a little longer."

"No," she said, "I'm tired. I'm sleepy."

"But you've got to keep moving!"

"I'm all right," she said languidly. "I'm not cold now. I'm all right. Just don't bother me. I want to sleep."

Jim Stanton lifted her up by the collar of her jacket and slapped her face with such a resounding slap that it stung his own hand through his glove. The girl's eyes widened, and he saw a spark of anger bring them to life.

"You hit me," she said in astonishment. "Jim! You hit me!"

"Yes," he answered, and there was a great happiness in him. "I hit you, and I'm going to hit you again if you don't start walking. Come on, now. Walk! You will freeze to death if you relax."

"I won't—"

He slapped her again, and taking her arm, he marched her toward the drift fence. She trudged along under his unmerciful urging with angry, stumbling steps until they reached the barbed wire.

Stanton forced her on until they reached the protective fence he had built around his reserve haystacks, then made her crawl through that fence and keep moving until they had reached the south side of one of the stacks.

Then he stood back and made her dig through the snow until she had cleaned away the drifted snow and exposed the hay. He felt he had exercised her enough by then. And in a few more minutes he had dug a hole deep into the stack.

"Now crawfish back into that hole," he ordered.

When she was in the stack, he backed in beside her, and pulled the loose hay at the edge of the stack down over the entrance hole, leaving the covering thin enough for them to get the air they needed.

He took her into his arms and held her shivering body close to him so as to give her such little warmth as he himself had. And thus they were silent for a long time while the insulation of the haystack gradually thawed them out.

Finally she said in a small voice, "Jim, Dad's out there somewhere. I've got to find him."

"He's safe up at the house," Stanton answered. "All you have to do is stay here and keep warm till this blows over."

"He came out to fix the fence, but Elder had already fixed it. It's a good thing Elder had this hay here, isn't it?" Stanton did not answer that, and she was thoughtful for a long moment, as though trying to puzzle things out. Then, "But what are you doing here, Jim? I thought you had gone away."

THIS WAS it. The showdown. He told her the whole story, not sparing himself. He told her how Elder had made a fool of him, how he had lost the money beyond any chance of ever recovering it, and about his deal with Walkup.

"So," he ended, "here I am, just a ranch hand trying to work out a home, like any other sharecropper."

She was lying in the hay with her back to him, and his arms around her. She was silent for another spell, and then she spoke again. "Jim, why did you slap me? Were you still angry with me because we fought the other day?"

"Of course not, dummy," he answered. "You were giving up. If I hadn't, you'd have lain down there in the snow and frozen to death. I had to keep that fighting spirit alive in you. And I had to keep you moving. But you're all right now, and we're going to be neighbors so you'll have all the time you want to repay me for that slap."

This time she was silent longer than usual, lost in some thought of her own. Finally she asked, "How long do you think it will take you to pay off Walkup, working for a share of the profit?"

"Maybe half my life," Stanton admitted. "I've got plenty to learn about this game."

"We could do this," she said thoughtfully. "You could go back to the rodeo next summer and make enough to pay Walkup for the ranch. I could look after things while you were gone, with Dad's help. Then we'd have the ranch clear of debt to start with."

"*We* could?" he returned in disbelief.

"Why not?" she asked practically. "We were going to get married, weren't we?"

He held that "we" in his heart as he was now holding her in his arms. "But the rodeo," he said. "You didn't like the idea. And I was willing to give it up. You didn't like the idea of marrying me, and I gave that up, too."

"But this is different," she argued. "You're a different man, and you'd be going back to rodeo work for a different purpose. You'd be going into it in order to get out of it. That's simple enough to understand, isn't it?"

"We can't catch our horses and get back to the house until this storm breaks," he said gravely. "So you've got plenty of time to explain to me in detail just why you're willing to marry a man like me. And that is something I want to hear over and over. Start telling me, will you?"

WIND WAGON THOMAS

THEY CALLED HIM "WINDY"

ONE of the most unusual sights to be seen in the West was created by a man who was nicknamed "Wind Wagon" Thomas. And the handle certainly fit, for his "work of art" consisted of an ordinary, oversized covered wagon, except for the fact that it didn't need oxen to provide movability. Instead, a small platform was designed to fit over the cover, at the front. A twenty-foot mast, to which a large sail was attached, rose in its center. The wind was supposed to do the rest, with the help of a steering wheel and a few other instruments.

Mr. Thomas built all this with the help of his company, the Santa Fe Overland Navigation, which he organized in 1853. He hoped it would revolutionize the commerce of the West. However, the maiden voyage of the ship-wagon was a little less than successful. For once the craft got rolling, with Thomas at the masthead and the stockholder-crew in positions inside, the wind really started blowing.

The wheels were fleet—and then even fleeter. At first, Thomas was delighted, then he decided to control the accelerated motion with the help of his assistants. He yelled directions at them—but absolutely nothing happened. Terrified by the great speed, they'd all hopped off.

Out of control, the enormous twenty-five-foot-long and seven-foot-wide vehicle, complete with its twelve-feet-in-diameter wheels, crashed ignominiously on the bank of a creek.

Thomas, uninjured, rose from the wreckage, and immediately began to plead with his company to build anew. But not a thing he could say would convince them again that the idea was practical—or convince anybody else, because no matter where "Wind Wagon" went, the story of Thomas' failure preceded him. Finally, it just didn't matter any more. The speedier Pony Express, and then the railroad and telegraph had sealed its doom.

—*Manly E. David*

SHOWDOWN LAW

Deputy Sheriff Rod Donahue was the law in Maverick County, but he had to prove it to Bull Mason, his father's killer!

ROD DONAHUE and his Uncle Hank ate supper in complete silence, except for the scrape of fork on tin plate. Donahue was deputy sheriff of Maverick County, twenty-two years old, and restless with the energies of youth. The two men heard the horse roam into the ranch-yard and slide to a stop at the rail.

Old Charley Gates was a man who seldom pushed his saddle-stock. He shouted his news as he hurried toward the two Donahues who were standing on the small porch of their house.

"Deputy Lennox was killed in town! Shanty Mason did the job, and he sent word he'd be waiting for you, Rod!"

Rod Donahue slapped for his six-shooter, and gripped the handle until his knuckles showed white. Shanty Mason was the son of old Bull Mason who had killed Rod Donahue's father when both had lived in Painted Rock. Then the Masons had taken over the Circle D for debt, and Hank Donahue had brought his only brother's son to Mesa City to raise.

Rod Donahue's brown eyes narrowed as he absorbed the shock of the news. "What happened?" he asked, moving quickly toward the stable while Gates told the story.

"It was an outside crowd," Gates informed. "They came in, looking for trouble, and one of them beat up old man Philips. When Lennox went to arrest him, the hombre beat him to the draw and killed him."

"You sure you know who did it?"

"Sure. Like I said, Shanty Mason. A dozen ranchers saw it."

Donahue hesitated just before he tightened the cinch, but only for an instant. A second later he was ready to ride. "He still in town?"

"Yep. He said—he said—"

"Well, spit it out, cowboy." Donahue was irritated. "What's so scarey about what he said?"

"He said to tell you to come run him out of town—if you've got the guts."

With the other deputy dead and the sheriff sick in a hospital in Jessup County, Donahue felt the pressure of his responsibility heavily. He sighed deeply. "I'll be there," he said softly. "I'm coming after him. But I ain't going to run him out of town. I'm going to throw him in a cell to stand trial for the murder of Deputy Lennox!"

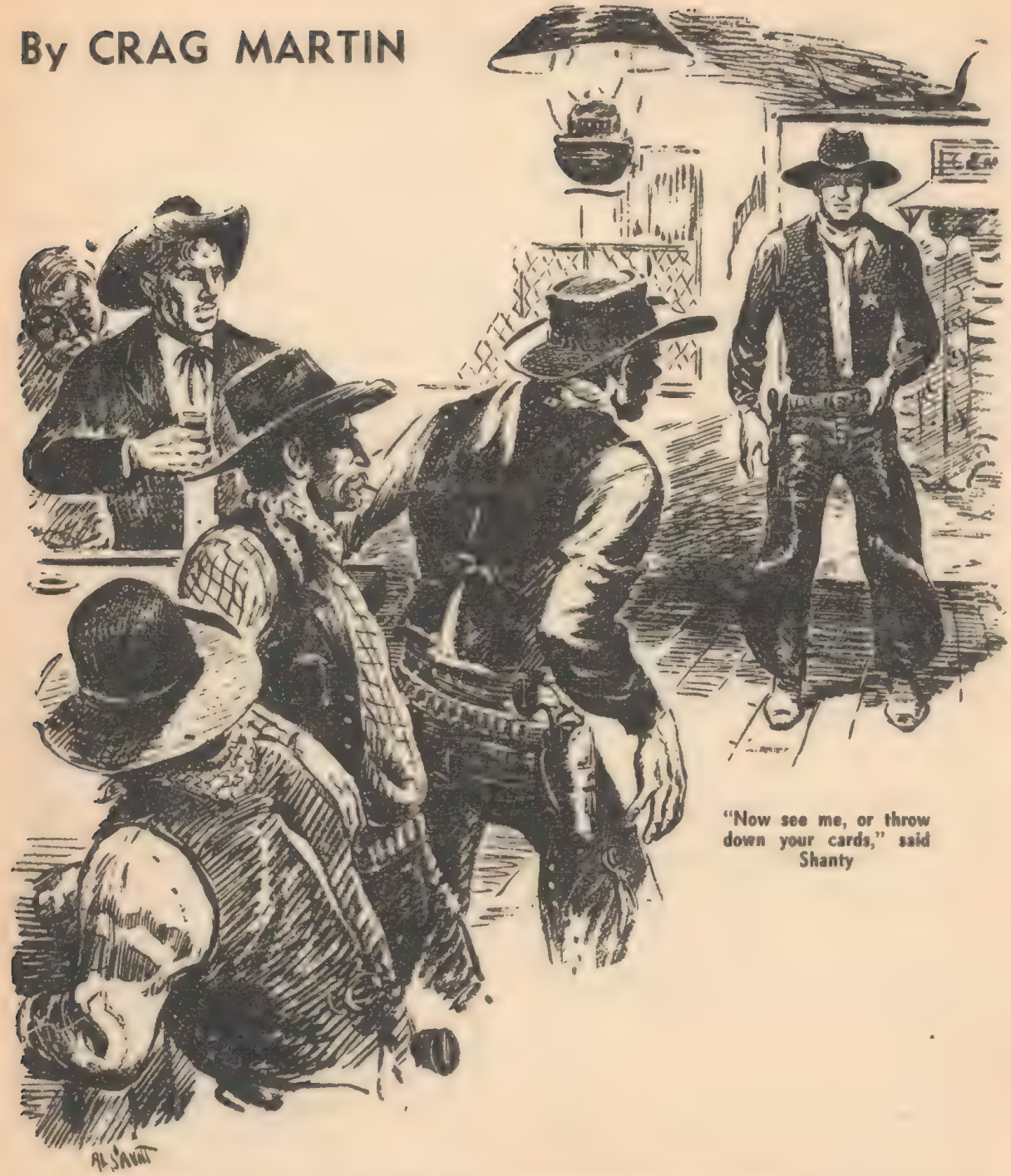
YOUNG DONAHUE RODE swiftly into town and went directly to his office. This was a matter of routine with the deputy sheriff, and he was just about to start the search for Shanty when a man appeared in the doorway. It was Tim Bently, owner of the Gay Blade saloon.

"They took over the place, Rod," he blurted agitated with a fright he could not suppress. "Ran me and everybody else out. You can still hear them breaking things up in there."

"What's got into Shanty?" Donahue growled. "He drunk, or crazy? I never knew him to set foot in Mesa City before. Painted Rock got too small for him?"

"He's drunk," Tim said. "But he's the

By CRAG MARTIN



"Now see me, or throw down your cards," said Shanty

coolest drunk I ever saw. And the fastest. He said he wants to see if you're as fast as they say you are. He doesn't think you are."

Donahue's face hardened, his thin lips became a taut line of determination. He hitched at the gun belt that hung casually about his lean waist. Then his bootheels clicked over the board walk past the seven buildings between his office and the Gay Blade.

Inside he could hear the raucous voices of the troublemakers. He patted the holster on his right leg, hooked his thumbs in the shell-studded belt at his waist and stepped quickly into the saloon. It was

a full minute before anyone saw him. Then two voices dwindled into silence as he was recognized. The puffy-faced, bleary-eyed leader turned around at the bar.

Shanty Mason caught sight of Donahue, and his eyes noted the star on the deputy sheriff's chest.

"The big sheriff!" he sneered. "Famous Rod Don'hue, come to run me out of town. Didn't think you had the stuff to try, Don'hue."

"You ain't leaving town!" the deputy sheriff barked. "You'll rest in a cell tonight, Mason."

Shanty came away from the bar in a crouch. "I'll bet you my life I won't," he whispered. "Now see me, or throw down your cards."

Donahue was aware that his Uncle Hank had followed him into the saloon. The older man, heavier of figure and touched lightly by age, made it two against three. He stood silently just inside the door to back up any play Rod Donahue might make.

"Why did you come to Mesa City?" Donahue demanded. "Ain't one town enough for you and your dad to control, Mason?"

Shanty Mason straightened up, but remained cat-ready for instant action.

"I've been hearing things," he answered harshly. "The rumor is around that you said my dad done you out of your ranch when you was still a button and lost your own Dad. Did you say it, or not?"

Donahue's face did not change expression, and his cold brown eyes never left young Mason's face. "Dad owned the Circle D, just outside of Painted Rock," he stated calmly. "He owed Bull Mason, your dad, for feed he got, and it was an honest debt. He would have paid, too, in time, but he was stoney when the bill came due. There was an argument between Bull Mason and Dad, and Dad died of gunshot wounds. Your dad took over the Circle D for a measly little debt not a tenth of the value of the ranch, knowing a kid of twelve couldn't do much about it!"

"Can you prove all that legal-like?" Mason demanded ominously.

Donahue slowly shook his head. "If I could I'd still own the Circle D."

"Then I'm saying you're a liar!"

Donahue's thin face whitened at the insult. His right hand moved toward his holstered gun. He concentrated on the fish-eyes of his enemy. When he read the sign there his hand became a fuzzy blur in the dim interior of the saloon. Almost in one motion his hand filled with his Colt, there was a spurt of flame and belched smoke, and Mason's gun fell from his hand just as it cleared leather. Pain wrenched his face. His right shoulder had been shattered, and he was groping at the bar for support.

"You two rannies just stand hitched there and you won't get hurt," Hank Donahue rasped out. The sound of a gun-hammer being eared back came clearly to all in the saloon.

Donahue beckoned to his uncle, covering the other two men with his six-shooter. "Toss their guns to the floor, Hank, and we'll get them down to the jail-house."

As the five men pushed through the batwing doors an ominous sound rumbled through the crowd that had gathered outside the saloon. Donahue halted his prisoners.

"Listen, folks," he said in a loud, sharp voice. "I know how you feel. But it can't be that way, not while I'm deputy sheriff. Every man's entitled to a fair trial. Now don't make my job any harder."

Donahue moved the men to the jail before the mob could gather new strength. Hank followed behind the deputy and the prisoners. He closed the jail-door with a scarred boot and perched on the edge of a roll-top desk as Donahue seated himself in the swivel-chair.

The deputy turned his attention to his charges. Pain-induced perspiration made Shanty Mason's face glisten unpleasantly in the lamp-light, and he bit his fat lips to stifle a groan.

For the moment, Donahue ignored Ma-

son, and addressed the other two men. "That crowd's in an ugly mood, hombres," he warned quietly. "One man would be easy enough for Hank to watch, for a day or two, out at our ranch. By that time public feeling will cool down a little, and I aim to see that Shanty Mason stands trial for murder. Now if you were willing to pay for the damages to the saloon, I might be willing to drop charges. Providing you agree to carry a message to Bull Mason for me."

Both men began reaching into their pockets for money.

"Just tell Mason this," Donahue instructed dryly. "Tell him I don't like owl-hoots shooting up my town."

The tall ranny with bony wrists answered him. "That'll make you about even, I reckon. Bull ain't going to like what happened to Shanty, either."

The frame building was packed at the meeting Rod Donahue had called for the next morning. Faces usually friendly were now openly hostile. Donahue sensed the temper of the crowd as he stepped to the small platform, moving his gun to a more comfortable position on his lean thigh.

"I know what you're thinking," he said slowly. "You're thinking that I didn't do my job when I let them rannies loose last night. But I did some thinking—and I didn't let Shanty Mason go!"

They shifted in their seats as they waited for him to continue.

"Lennox's killer is still in custody. To make sure you men wouldn't do something you'd regret for the rest of your lives, I moved him under guard to a place where he'll be safe until he can stand trial. Them other owl hoots paid for the damage they did to the saloon. They didn't do any other harm, and we don't need their kind in town. Now I'm asking you to let the law take its course."

"Mason's guilty as sin!" an angry voice shouted from the rear of the hall. "Why don't we just take him out and hang him, before he makes a hell-hole out of Mesa City like he did Painted Rock?"

"Mason is guilty," Donahue admitted as he rapped for order with the butt of his gun. "And he'll probably hang—after he gets a fair trial. He won't be moving into Mesa City or anyplace else, now."

THE YOUNG deputy sheriff fully expected Bull Mason to attempt to release his injured son, because it was clear a trial could end in only one verdict. When two full days had passed without incident of any kind Donahue became impatient. On the evening of the second day he showed signs of strain as he kicked irritably at the scuffed flooring in his quiet office.

He angled toward the door, his hands poised above his Colt, as a faint sound came to his ears. A second later the door burst open and Hank fell across the threshhold.

Donahue smothered a curse as he moved swiftly to the old man's side. Hands surprisingly gentle lifted Hank from the floor, and his uncle's vise-like grip on his arms told Donahue that the oldster was in terrific pain. He eased the injured man into the swivel-chair and knelt to make his examination.

"Just my—leg," Hank gasped. "Deep flesh wound, is all."

"Start at the beginning," Donahue growled to hide his true feelings. "How'd you get it, and where'd you leave Shanty Mason?"

They heard the stage rattling past the jail on its way to the hotel. In the quiet that followed its passing the old man told his story.

"Shanty's dead," Hank stated. He wiped at his face with a trembling hand. "He had a hideout gun, and I saw him start to reach for it. He stopped when I saw him, maybe hoping I hadn't seen, but when I went to search him he knew I was onto him and he tried to outdraw me. Almost did, too. Got me in the leg, but I had time to throw off my shot, Rod. He's dead, back at the ranch."

Donahue sighed. "Wasn't anything else you could do,' he admitted. "Shanty knew he was guilty as a mortal could be. He could guess what the verdict would be,

and he preferred to take his chances. He gambled and lost." His tone said the case was closed. "Now you wait here and I'll scout up the doc and see just how bad that leg is."

Shattering glass avalanched to the floor behind the deputy sheriff. Before he could turn, a low grating voice that carried to the far corners of the room stopped him.

"Hold it, law-dog, and keep them hands in plain sight."

Someone was coming into the room through the broken window. A second later a big man, a gun in his hand with hammer held back by thumb, stepped in front of Donahue. It was Bull Mason.

Donahue looked into Mason's slitted black eyes, noting the purpled hollows brought on by the sleeplessness his son's predicament had caused him. On his square and massive jaw a stubble of beard was beginning to show. His neck, thick and heavy, was responsible for his nickname. His shoulders were still powerful, but the lean waist of his youth had thickened, and his legs had become bowed by years in the saddle. Physically he could still have made three of the deputy sheriff. From his position beside the injured man in the swivel-chair, Rod Donahue continued to look up fearlessly at the towering figure above him.

Mason, finishing his appraisal of Donahue, addressed him.

"You're the gent that bushwhacked my younker," he said almost with relief, like a hunter who has run his quarry to bay.

Donahue shook his head. "Shanty killed a man," he stated in a flat voice. "I beat him to the draw, fair and square, and I arrested him."

Mason snorted. "I came to take Shanty home with me," he said. "I'll be on my way as soon as you tell me where to find him."

The deputy sheriff grunted, and he heard Hank shift in the chair behind him. Hank spoke before Donahue found the words he wanted.

"He's dead, Mason. You'll find the body up at my spread."

Mason's sharp intake of breath was like the hiss of a rattler. For a long second he hung poised, ready to strike, his finger tight on the trigger of his gun. Donahue waited, ready to match his speed against the big man's drop.

"Tell it straight," Bull Mason growled, trying to cover his grief. "Tell me how Shanty got it."

PITY SOFTENED Hank's pale face for a second, and in a low voice he told Mason what had happened. Mason's eyes were clouded when Hank finished, and for a long minute the rasped breathing of the big man was the only sound to be heard in the dimly lit office.

Then Mason shook his head vigorously as if to rid himself of a measure of his grief. He turned sharply to the deputy. "You're the Donahue kid, ain't you, who run away from Painted Rock with his tail between his legs some years back?"

Donahue's brown eyes took on a dangerous glint. "I'm Donahue," he admitted. "Deputy sheriff of Mesa City now. I left Painted Rock when I was a button, cheated out of my ranch by a smooth-talking crook." He saw Mason's finger whiten on the trigger of the gun,

"I'll pass that for now," Bull Mason pronounced carefully. "We'll even it all up anyway. You're the law of Mesa City, and I run Painted Rock—what I say there goes. You think you're fast. I *know* I'm the fastest with the gun, and I come to take up for my boy."

"Make it now," Donahue urged quietly. "You came for a showdown. Holster your gun, and we'll draw even."

Mason shook his head, the thin smile on his lips doing nothing to soften his bitter eyes. "Youth!" he accused. "You think I stowed away in a trunk and got jounced all over the place on that stage just to get shot after I kill you here?" The inflection of his voice told of the satisfaction he had had in outsmarting the deputy sheriff in getting into town. "I knew you had a posse waiting for me to try to free Shanty. I find out things, and I find out how to get what I want. And now that this thing has come up, I'll be taking over

Mesa City to add to Painted Rock."

"So you came," Donahue taunted. "You said you wanted satisfaction, and here I am. What are we waiting for?"

Bull indicated Hank with his gun muzzle. "You," he commanded. "Get up out of that chair, bad leg and all. You're going with me to Painted Rock. The sheriff here will tell everybody to let us through, if he wants you to keep breathing." He turned to Donahue. "I aim to kill you, Donahue, but I intend to keep living to enjoy the things it has taken me half a lifetime to get. So *you* come to Painted Rock to meet me in showdown. By tomorrow night. Without your boys it'll be you against me. And if you don't come, I'll use your bullet on Hank Donahue!"

Donahue tensed with the challenge. "When I come," he stressed the first word, "how do I know your boys will turn us loose if I win?"

"You've got no cause for worry," Bull said light irony. "On account of you'll be dead. And unless I miss my guess Hank here will try to settle for you, and he'll be dead, too." He finished with mock solemnity. "We'll send your bodies home for planting."

For an instant, Donahue could scarcely resist the impulse to go for his gun. Wisely, he realized the futility of such a move. He looked at his uncle.

"It's going to be tough, with that leg," he observed.

"I'll make it," Hank said assuringly. "I've got it tied up some now. Do what has to be done, and you can count on me to do my part."

Some of Hank's self-possession flowed into the deputy.

"You win this hand," he said to Mason with vigor. "But the game ain't over by a long shot. I'm calling your hand in Painted Rock—that's a promise!"

PAINTED ROCK was waiting. Bull Mason sat behind a big scarred desk in his carpeted office, the green shade drawn against the glare of the fast-sinking sun. He fired a stogie, pushing the box across the desk to Hank with his foot. Hank Donahue, passably comfortable in a chair on the other side of the desk, declined the smoke with a silent shake of his head.

"That kid nephew of yours," Mason said, puffing importantly at the stogie. "Kinda tickles me in a way. Gave me my start here in a manner of speaking. Fast too, if he beat Shanty to the draw, like some say he did." If the mention of his son's name brought heartache to Mason he gave no sign. "Now I'm going to kill him."

"Maybe," Hank reflected. "Maybe not."

"You know I'll kill him!"

"It's possible, but I don't know you'll kill him."

"All right, it's possible, then," snapped Mason. "Since you admit that much, how come you to be so unworried?"

Hank was rolling a brown-paper cigarette with steady hands. "Why, it's just that I reckon no man can live forever," he explained quietly. "Some live longer than others. Main thing, to my way of thinking, is to live so's you're ready to die when your ticket gets punched. Rod is ready, I'm ready—and you ain't!" He drew his tongue smoothly along the edge of the quirly and twisted the end. "So no matter how it goes, it's going to be interesting to watch."

His face red with anger, Mason was about to vent his spleen on Hank when the door of his office opened. "Get out!" he roared to the intruder. "Close the door and leave us alone."

The man blanched, retreated a step, but he persisted with his message. "There's a traveling peddler here, boss. He won't leave. Says you could at least look at his stuff—and I 'membered how you like to look over new things."

Mason drew a deep breath, and his face seemed to lose some of its thunder. A shine of cunning came into his eyes, and it was obvious to Hank that Bull Mason was about to test some secret strategy he had just decided upon.

"Show the gent in," Mason instructed the man waiting in the doorway. To Hank he said. "We'll see what his idea is on

dying. Maybe this peddler's ready, too."

Hank Donahue blew cigarette smoke at the dirty ceiling, betraying nothing of the turmoil that churned within him, for he suspected that Mason would kill the luckless transient merchant.

"Ain't nothing much you wouldn't do, is there, Bull?"

Both men watched the peddler come slowly into the room. He walked as if his back were made of wood. A battered, sweat-stained Stetson was pulled low over his half-closed eyes, and cowhorn mustaches hid his mouth. His shoulders were stooped as if upon them he carried the weight of the universe. The long, heavy coat he wore was buttoned, though the day was hot. However, in the face of his apparent resignation, this did not seem incongruous.

There was something tantalizingly familiar about the man to Hank, and he continued to stare at the stranger in puzzlement.

The peddler closed the door behind him by leaning wearily against it. Now the three were quite alone in the office. Mason, incredulous, stepped to the side of the desk to continue his investigation of the man before him.

"I ought to shoot you," he blared into the face of the merchant. "I ought to shoot you to show this hombre that I ain't afraid of dying, or scared of anything anybody or anything can do to me once I'm gone."

Understanding suddenly bloomed on Hank's face a second before it happened.

The merchant erupted into life in lightninglike movements. As the heavy coat fell to the floor, it revealed the figure of a man in range clothing, the star on his shirt throwing some of its light onto the blue steel of the Colt in his hand.

"I came to take Hank back to Mesa City," Rod Donahue, deputy sheriff, said in a soft voice filled with satisfaction.

Bull Mason's mouth twitched, and Donahue knew the big man was measuring his chances of risking a draw.

"So this is how you face showdown," Mason sneered. "You don't pack the sand! So that's how Shanty got his."

Donahue shook his head. "That's not the way of it at all. Just wanted to show you it doesn't take much brains to get into a town," he said. "Just wanted to be sure after this thing is over I'll be able to walk away, too. The people in Painted Rock are so sick of your rotten setup they'd probably protect me from your owlhoots themselves. Played it safe by having some of my boys ride in by twos and threes, to back me."

DONAHUE still held the drop, and Mason waited for the next move. The deputy's face was bleak and without pity and his voice came harsh when he spoke again. "Your kind and mine can't exist together," he barely whispered. "It's the law versus the owlhoot trail. One or the other. It can't be both."

"I'll take my chances," Mason murmured, half crouching. "Showdown. That's what I crave. Only it ain't showdown when one of us has a fistful of gun," he reminded.

Implacably Donahue holstered his gun in a blur of moving arm and hissing leather. Mason smiled evilly as the odds against him were wiped away. He poised for his strike.

"You give the go ahead," he invited softly. "We'll both start from scratch. The better man will walk out of the room while the other shakes hands with the devil."

Donahue knew that Mason would never pull a sneak on him. He might be a killer and worse, but as a gunman he would live or die by the Code. Then Donahue saw the moth darting in erratic circles about the kerosene lamp dangling from a chain in the center of the ceiling.

Mason followed the deputy's unblinking stare as he indicated the moth flying about the open flame. "That moth. Sooner or later it'll land in the fire," he said softly. "When it does, it'll be the signal to go for our hardware."

"When the moth dies he'll beat you by a split second," Mason breathed, fastening his eyes on the insect.

Both fixed their eyes on the moth.

ROD DONAHUE didn't answer, giving his complete attention to the moth. The silence in the room grew frozen, forbidding, as the moth continued to circle the small flame in a monotonous series of circles. Once it flew above the lamp, and then it fell below, and Donahue thought that he would have to pick another signal. For a second he felt a chill along his spine. It was the first time he had not been able to watch his opponent's eyes for the tell-tale sign that came a split second before a man drew. Then he realized that Mason was at an equal disadvantage.

The moth made one last wide arc about the lamp, then plunged its fluttering wings suddenly into the deadly little flame. Before its dead substance reached the floor, two right hands slapped leather at the same instant. Two shots roared out and reverberated throughout the room.

It was Bull Mason who fell back under the impact of the merciless lead. Clutching at his chest, he swayed unsteadily, and then pitched forward onto the floor. Donahue saw the gray pallor of impending death reach his bloodless lips.

"You got me," the big man murmured. A red stain appeared over his heart, and began widening out in the folds of his dirty shirt. "She's getting dark, and it won't be long till I ride out on the big gather."

"I had to do it," Donahue mumbled.

"Do some fast writing, because I've only got a few minutes," Mason ordered Hank Donahue. "I'm turning the old Donahue spread over to a better man. Me and Shanty won't need it no more. It might help some where I'm going. Write it out, and I'll sign!"

Old Hank Donahue wrote the will according to Mason's direction. He steadied the dying man while Mason scrawled his signature. Then he held a small liquor flask to the big man's lips to ease his passing. Painful minutes later Hank Donahue knew he was holding a lifeless man in his gnarled arms.

"The sheriff will be back soon, Rod," he said to his nephew as he pulled the dead man's Stetson over the wide, staring eyes. "I'm just asking your plans, once you're free to do as you like."

Rod Donahue frowned without answering and there was a troubled look in his eyes.

"He wasn't all bad, sher'ff," old Hank said gently. "But it goes to prove a gent can't do his best work when he is wrong. Let's rope him on his bronc and take him back to town. We'll plant him alongside Shanty, and they'll both rest better that way!"

"Dad will take his rest now, too," the young deputy sheriff decided softly. "I'm going to turn in my star, and take over the Circle D. I never was rightly cut out to be a star-totin' gun slammer!" ●

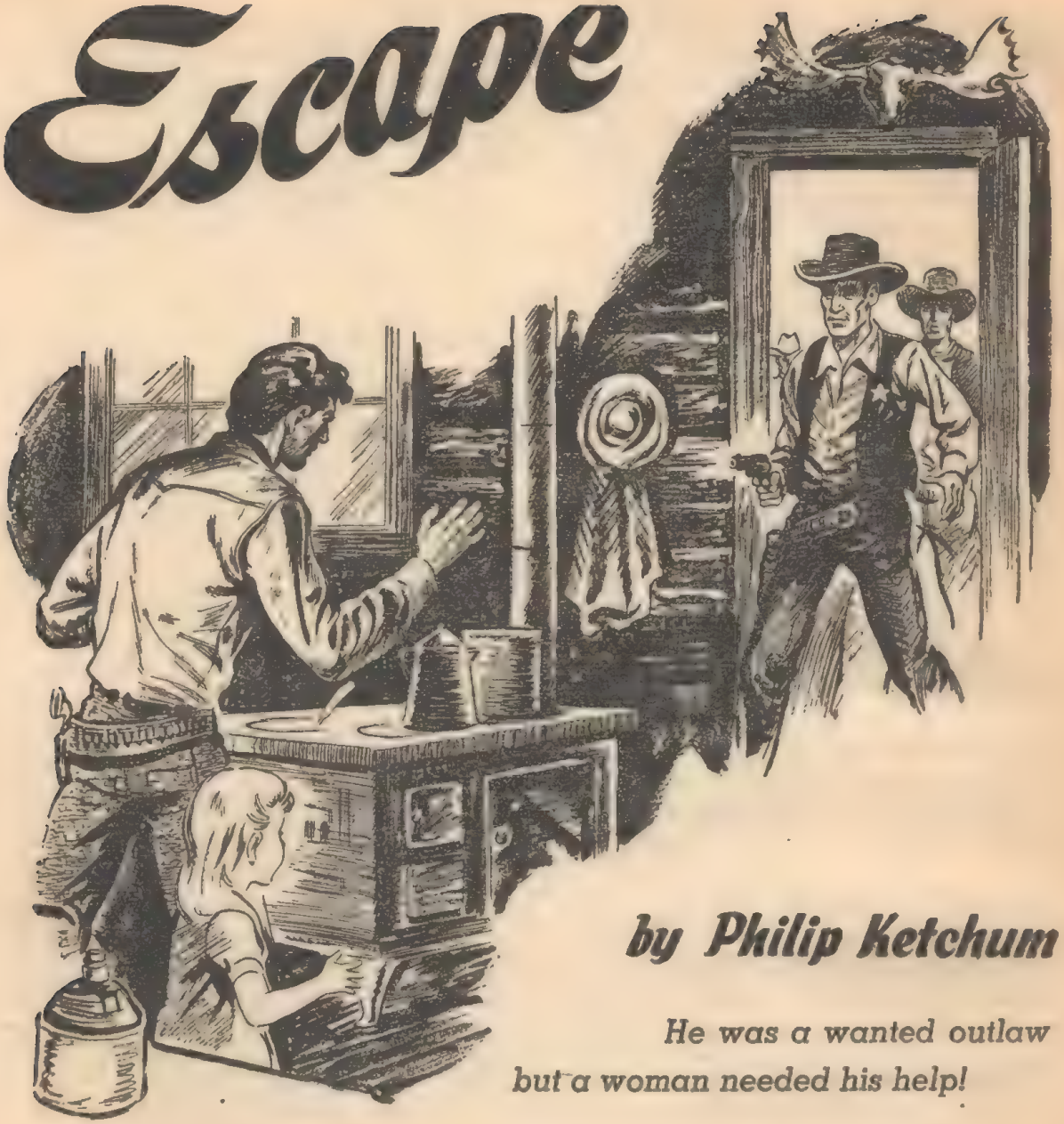
NOT ACCORDING TO HOYLE

IN THE 1880's, cowboys often played billiards—without benefit of cue, chalk, or excessive waist-bending. Instead, each player mounted the table along with his horse and pranced the creature around. The number of balls that hit the pockets via the hoofs of the animal within a limited time period settled that player's scoring.

Poker was also occasionally played on horseback by simply galloping into a saloon and, without dismounting, trotting over to a table and dealing out the cards.

—*Jackson Cole*

Escape



by Philip Ketchum

He was a wanted outlaw but a woman needed his help!

FROM behind a screen of bushes on the edge of the bluff, Dan Morgan watched the posse turn south. As it drew farther and farther away, a slow smile came to his lips. Once more he had done it. Once more his luck had stood by him. His escape was as good as accomplished. By the time the posse discovered the trail they were following was false, he would be well into the mountains.

His smile broadened. He mounted, turned his horse and rode west. For a while he tried to imagine the chagrin and anger of the posse when they discovered they had been fooled. Then, gradually, a more serious expression came into his face. It wouldn't always work out this way, he knew. In the last two years he had had more than his share of luck. On a dozen different occasions, or even more, he had come awfully close to being trapped by other posses, yet, in some way or other, he had always managed to escape. Sooner or later, however, the time would come

when he could not escape, when his luck would desert him, when the arm of the law would strike him down.

Riding slowly through the foothills clustered near the Smoky mountains, Dan Morgan's thoughts turned back over the two years just gone. They puzzled him, those last two years. They didn't fit into the pattern of life which had gone before. Sometimes they seemed to lack any substance of reality. He could trace, step by step, the course of events which had led him from the obscurity of a foreman's job on a small ranch in western Texas, to prominence as an outlaw, wanted in half a dozen states. But even then it was hard to realize that he was the Dan Morgan whose name and description was on many a sheriff's poster.

He was that Dan Morgan, however, and if he wasn't guilty of all the crimes charged against his name, he was still guilty of many of them. That fact he accepted without attempt at rationalization.

SHRUGGING his heavy shoulders, Dan Morgan threw off all thoughts of the past and surveyed the country ahead of him. He would have little trouble, he decided, making his way across the mountains. They were neither high nor rugged, and in several places, he had heard, there were wide meadows and ranch lands.

As he topped a gentle hill he noticed a cabin off to the left in the shelter of several tall pines. There was a look of newness about it. Bark still clung to the pine slab roof and grass grew close up to the cabin's side. Beyond it there was a half finished barn and an empty corral.

Morgan drew rein and for several moments studied the cabin. No smoke showed from the chimney. There was no sign of life around the place. He was hungry and it struck him suddenly that if the owner were away he could probably get something to eat with no necessity for delay or explanation.

Turning his horse toward the cabin, he rode forward, dismounted near the corral, looped his reins over a post and turned to the door. His hand was on the latch when he heard a voice from within the cabin and at the sound of it he frowned. He hadn't been able to distinguish any words but from the tone of the voice he guessed that it was a child he had heard. As he hesitated, he caught the sound of a low, murmured answer.

For a moment longer, he waited. Then, once more shrugging his shoulders, he knocked on the door. When someone cried, "Come in. Oh, please come in," he opened it and stood in the entrance, one hand by habit resting on his gun, ready to jerk it up if necessary.

The interior of the cabin was very plain, and the furnishings were crude. The floor was of sod. At one side, there was a pine slab table and three box chairs, on the other side, an old stove. In the rear there were two bunks. A woman's figure lay on one of them and near her, seated on the ground and staring up at him, there was a little girl with long, tangled, yellow hair, blue eyes and a very dirty face.

Morgan's hand dropped from his gun. He stared at the woman. Her cheeks were apple red in a pallid face. Her lips were thick and dry. There was an unnatural brightness to her eyes. It seemed to him that he could almost feel the fever which racked her body. Suddenly she spoke and her words almost took his breath away.

"I prayed that you would come," she whispered huskily. "I prayed—and you came."

Dan Morgan blinked. He could think of nothing but that the woman was out of her mind. He had some conception of how he looked. His clothing was old. The coat he had on was out at the elbows and there was a great rent in his trousers just above the knee. For three days he hadn't shaved and the bristle of a black beard covered his jaw and throat. His hair was shaggy and long and his face was grimy. Too astonished to answer her, he didn't move from the doorway.

"Come in," said the woman. "I—I don't have very long."

Morgan entered the room. He glanced down at the little girl. He guessed that she might be three or maybe four years

old. Her body was thin. She wore no shoes or stockings. When he had opened the door, she apparently had been building something with wooden blocks, but now she was staring up at him, wide-eyed, mouth open.

"Her name is—Martha," said the woman.

Morgan lifted his eyes to the bed. Covers were piled around the woman's body but, even so, he could observe how difficult it was for her to breathe. He had never seen a person with pneumonia but for some reason or other, he was suddenly sure that this woman had pneumonia and that her condition was quite serious.

"Where is your husband?" he asked bluntly.

THE woman's lips formed the word, "Dead," and she glanced down at the girl.

"You mean you're here alone, you and the little girl?"

"Yes."

"And no one knows—"

"That's why—I prayed for you to come."

Dan Morgan drew a deep breath. He wondered how far it was to the nearest ranchhouse. He wondered where was the nearest place to which he could take word of this woman's condition. She needed a doctor and she needed one quickly.

The woman pushed a thin arm from the covers and beckoned him closer. "My name is Sarah Kruse," she muttered swiftly. "My husband's name was William. He was killed just before I became ill. A horse fell on him. I—I buried him—out back of the barn—when Martha was asleep. She doesn't know."

The woman's voice broke off. She shuddered, bit her lips.

Morgan leaned over and felt her head. It was almost like touching a hot stove. Fever was burning her up.

"We're from Michigan," the woman went on. "But we don't have any people, Bill or me. I—I've been thinking about Martha. I don't want her to go to an orphan's home. There's good blood in her. Maybe some family—"

Again the woman stopped speaking. Tears showed in her eyes and her features twisted as though in pain.

Morgan smiled. He said with an assurance he didn't feel, "Now you stop worrying, Mrs. Kruse. You're going to be all right."

"You'll see—about Martha?"

"I'll see about you first," said Morgan.

He looked around the room. Near the stove there was a huge crock. He moved that way. There was a little water in the bottom of the crock. It was tepid and not too clean. Morgan found a cup and poured it full of water. He carried the cup back to the bed. The woman took only a mouthful.

"That's all the water—there is left," she whispered.

Morgan found a cloth and wet it. He placed the cloth on the woman's head.

"Drink," said the little girl. "I want drink."

Dan Morgan poured some water for the girl. She drank it all, passed back the cup and said very seriously, "I'm hungry."

"Shall I feed her?" Morgan asked the mother.

"Yes," said the woman. "There are some boiled potatoes in the pan on the stove. In the cabinet there are some tinned tomatoes. I've tried to look after her but the last two days it's been hard. Would you mind—"

Dan Morgan walked over to the stove. He built a fire and started heating the potatoes. He opened one of the tins in the box cabinet and poured the contents into a pan. The little girl watched him, her eyes unblinking and sober.

While the food warmed, Morgan changed the cloth on the woman's head, went out to his horse and brought in a canteen of water. He would feed the little girl, he decided, then ride to the nearest ranch. Even though it was twenty miles away, he felt that he ought to be able to get there and get someone back here before midnight.

When the food was warmed, Morgan dished up a plate of tomatoes and potatoes for the girl and he carried another plate

to the woman in the bed. The woman looked at the food then looked away. "I don't think I want it."

Morgan gave her more water, wet the cloth on her head and replaced it. He glanced at the girl. She was eating wolfishly. A trail of tomato juice showed on the front of her dress.

"You'll—look after her?" whispered the woman.

"Don't you worry," Morgan answered.

"We're so far off here," said the woman. "No one knows what happened to Bill. And then I got sick and the horses got away and all I could do was—pray for you to come."

Morgan took the girl's empty plate and gave her the plate her mother had refused. He moved over to the door. The sun had gone down and the air was thickening with shadows. He turned back to the woman. "Where's the nearest ranch?" he asked.

"Christofferson's. It's back in the hills."

Morgan nodded. He said, "All right, Mrs. Kruse. I'm going there for help. We'll get a doctor if we can and we'll find someone to look after Martha until you're better."

Darkness was beginning to seep into the cabin and the woman's features were indistinct. She moved restlessly and the moistened cloth fell from her head. Morgan replaced it.

The woman said, "Bill—Bill," and then began muttering something Morgan couldn't make out.

Martha came up to the bed, pulled at the covers. "Mother—mother," she cried. "Where's my big doll? I want my big doll."

Morgan drew the girl aside, squatted on the sod floor near her. He said slowly, "Martha, you're a big girl now and your mother's sick. You mustn't bother her. You must let her sleep."

"But I want my big doll."

"Where is your big doll?"

The girl looked around the cabin. She said suddenly, "There it is," and pointed over to the other bunk.

Morgan smiled. He said, "All right, Martha. You get it and climb into bed and go right to sleep."

The woman suddenly sat up in the bed, throwing back the covers. She cried, "Bill! Bill!" and there was a sharp note of hysteria in her voice.

Morgan hurried back across the room. He took her shoulders and tried to force her back in the bed but she twisted free, swung her feet to the ground. A confusion of words tumbled from her throat, words that made no sense. She tried to brush past Morgan, tried to push him out of the way.

Morgan picked her up but, strong as he was, he could hardly hold her. The woman struck at him, clawed at his face. He lowered her to the bed, held her there while he pulled the covers up around her. She fought him with a strength which almost matched his own. Her words became a gibberish of horrible, rasping sounds.

Half across the room, Martha was crying. Morgan glanced around at her. He said sharply, "Martha! Bring me some water." But the girl didn't seem to understand him.

As suddenly as it had come the woman's delirium passed and all the strength went out of her body. Morgan released her and stood up. He was perspiring. He crossed over and got the water crock and carried it back to the bed, moistened a cloth and bathed the woman's face. It was still hot and flushed and her breathing seemed more labored. He was afraid that she was dying.

MARTHA crept up to his side and stared with big round eyes at her mother. The little girl seemed frightened.

Morgan turned to her and said bluntly, "I thought I told you to get your big doll and get into bed."

Martha's lips trembled. She started to cry.

"Get to bed," Morgan ordered.

The girl backed away and Morgan glanced over at the woman. She was stirring again, rolling her head from side to side. Her eyes were glazed.

Morgan's lips tightened. He realized

suddenly that he didn't dare leave her here and go after help. In the clutch of another delirium she might leave her bed and never get back to it. What he could do for her besides keep her in the bed, he didn't know. He wondered if sponging her body would help break the fever, if he ought to try it.

Martha had climbed into the other bunk. Dan Morgan looked that way, then glanced back at the woman. He picked up the cloth, moistened it, reached clumsily under the covers and began to bathe the woman's body. An amused thought came to him and he said half aloud, "I wonder what that posse would think if they happened in on me now?"

In the gray light of the dawn, next morning, Dan Morgan stood in the doorway of the cabin and stared off to the east. There were haggard lines in his face and his eyes were webbed with thickening red lines. Behind him he could hear the deep, rasping breath of the woman. She still lived, though by what strength he didn't know. It would be a long time, he decided, before he would ever be able to forget the horror and the strain of the night just past.

Footsteps padded across the sod floor and Martha came up to his side. "Hello," she greeted him. "I'm hungry again."

In spite of himself, Morgan smiled. "So you're hungry, huh?"

Martha nodded.

Still smiling, Morgan sat down. "My name's Dan," he told the little girl, "but long ago, my friends used to call me Danny. Could you call me that?"

"Da'y," said the girl.

"No, Dan—ny," Morgan corrected her. "Say it!"

But the child just stared at him.

Dan Morgan laughed. He took the girl on his knees and looked searchingly into her face. Despite the dirt, he could see that she had good features. Her forehead was high and her eyes were set far apart. Her hair was very fine.

"I'm hungry," the girl reminded him.

Dan Morgan put her down and stood up. Once, last night, he had risked leaving the sick woman long enough to unsaddle his horse and move him back of the sheltering pine trees to a place where he could graze. Morgan stared that way now, measuring the distance. There was a chance, he knew, that the posse would turn back, pick up his trail and find him. If he sighted them coming this way, there would be just one thing for him to do. He would have to run for it. There was little question in his mind as to what the men in the posse would do if they caught him.

Morgan stared down at the girl. He said, "Martha, you stay here and watch out that way." He pointed to the east. "There are some men over that way, men on horseback. If you see them coming, call me."

"But I'm so—"

"Yes, I know. You want breakfast. Well, after a while I'll take care of that. You watch."

THE girl sat down and stared off to the east, holding her chin in her hands. Dan Morgan grinned. He turned and went back inside the cabin. The woman in the bed was lying motionless and as Morgan crossed over to her she opened her eyes and looked up into his face. Her lips moved. "You're—still here."

"Yes, still here," Morgan answered.

"Martha?"

Dan Morgan smiled. "She's hungry again."

There was no answering smile on the woman's face. "You'll take care of her, won't you?" she whispered.

Dan Morgan knelt at the side of the bed. The woman's voice had been so low that he had hardly caught the words. The sudden conviction came to him that she was dying. He said stubbornly, "Now look here, Mrs. Kruse. You're going to get well. You—"

The woman drew a deep, shuddering breath. "It's not so hard—to leave Martha—since you have come," she whispered. "I know that—my little girl will be all right."

A sudden rush of feeling clogged Dan Morgan's throat. He stared at the woman without making any answer. Martha had

come into the room and was tugging at his coat but he was hardly aware of the fact that the girl was there until he saw the woman looking at her. There was a smile, now, on Mrs. Kruse's lips. She whispered, "Martha—Martha—"

Dan Morgan stood up. In the sick woman's eyes there was the shadow of death. He felt Martha's hand clutching at one of his fingers and he said thickly, "Come on, Martha. Let's you and me go outside for a while and let your mother get to sleep."

He turned toward the door, took one step that way, stopped. In the doorway stood a man and behind him were other men. A gun in the man's hands covered Morgan.

"Get your hands up, Morgan," barked the man. "This is the end of your trail."

Dan Morgan didn't raise his hands. He stared at the man dully. There was a gleam of satisfaction in the man's eyes and a deep assurance in his manner. On his vest there was a sheriff's star. In a rather confused way, Dan Morgan realized that this was the posse. Even as he had guessed might happen, they had turned back, found his trail and tracked him here. Martha, seeing them approach, had come to warn him but he had been so absorbed in his feelings there at the bedside that he hadn't heeded the girl's presence.

"Get 'em up," barked the sheriff again.

Morgan lifted his hands, pulling one of them away from Martha. He said nothing, for there was nothing to say. The sheriff moved into the room and others crowded in after him. In their faces Morgan could read his judgment.

"Who's that in the bed?" demanded one of the men.

"She's dead," Morgan said huskily. "She died just as you rode up."

Two members of the posse moved warily around to the bed, whispered together for a moment, then looked back at the sheriff, bewilderment showing in their eyes. Martha was clutching Dan Morgan's legs. She was whimpering.

[*Turn page*]

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The two men who had crossed over to the bed, moved back to the sheriff and said something to him which Morgan couldn't hear. The sheriff frowned, looked down at the girl and then over toward the bed. He shook his head and said stubbornly, "This is Morgan, all right. I saw him once before. I've never forgotten a face in my life."

AT THE sheriff's words, Dan Morgan stiffened, and a notion occurred to him. At first the thought of attempting such a trick seemed to be ridiculous. But the idea gripped his imagination. His eyes swept the room, dropped to the head of the girl still clutching his legs. Martha was acting for all the world like a daughter might be expected to act under such circumstances. Morgan drew a deep breath. Unmindful of the guns covering him, he dropped a hand to the girl's head and patted it.

The sheriff's scowl deepened. "What happened here, Morgan?" he barked.

Morgan shook his head. "My name is Kruse. Bill Kruse."

"I said *Morgan,*" snapped the sheriff.

Morgan shrugged. There was a box chair near by. He sat down on it, put an arm around Martha, stared at the floor and shuddered. His attitude didn't give the appearance of tension, but every nerve in his body was sharply alert.

The sheriff moved forward. "Morgan," he said bluntly, "you can't get away with it. We followed the trail of your horse straight from where you gave us the slip to this door. The horse is outside."

Morgan looked up. He said simply, "Last night some man stopped here. He said he would ride to Christofferson's ranch and send help. He took my horse and left his, for mine was fresh."

The sheriff blinked and bit his lips. For the first time an expression of doubt came across his face. Morgan wiped a hand across his forehead. He patted Martha's shoulder and in a heavy, flat voice, he said, "I didn't think it was bad until too late. I thought Sarah only had a bad cold. Even yesterday I thought it was only a bad cold

and she did, too. Then last night—"

Morgan let his voice trail off. He looked down at the floor.

The sheriff crossed over to the bed and stared at the silent figure lying there. The other men in the room had taken off their hats. Morgan had the sudden feeling that he was going to win out. Every fact in the situation was in his favor. Few men would ever think that Dan Morgan, the outlaw, fleeing from a posse, would have stopped to care for a dying woman. His story, explaining the presence of the horse outside, was more than logical. And the way Martha was clinging to him furnished a final proof. That the girl was bewildered and probably frightened by a terror nameless to her, wasn't apparent.

The sheriff turned away from the bed. His eyes searched Morgan's face and once more he scowled. "What's the kid's name?"

"Martha," Dan Morgan answered.

"Come here, Martha," said the sheriff.

Martha looked around. She had stopped whimpering.

"Come here, Martha," said the sheriff again.

The girl glanced up at Dan Morgan.

Dan Morgan's arm had instinctively tightened around her shoulder. A sudden chill stabbed through his body. He looked at the sheriff. There was a sharp glint in the sheriff's eyes. The sheriff unpinned his star. He held it out toward the girl. "See what I've got, Martha. Wouldn't you like to have it."

The gleam of the badge caught the girl's attention. She left Morgan's side, walked over to the sheriff, reached up for the badge, took it and turned it in her hands.

"Like it?" asked the sheriff.

Martha nodded. She put a point of the star into her mouth and bit on it experimentally.

The sheriff squatted down at her side. "Martha," he said, "is that your father over there?"

MARTHA blinked at the sheriff. She took the star out of her mouth and looked at it. Dan Morgan's body was rigid.

[*Turn page*]

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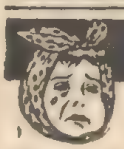

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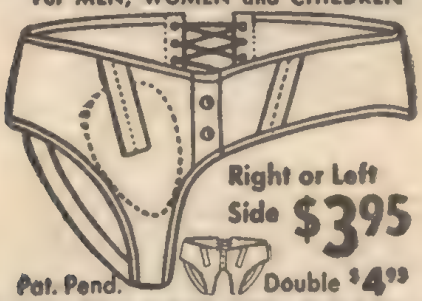

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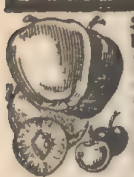

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He measured the distance to the door but three men stood there. Any chance for escape was blocked.

"Martha," said the sheriff again. "Is that your father over there?"

The little girl looked around at Morgan. She dropped the star, picked it up. Morgan bit his lips.

The sheriff reached for the star. He said, "Martha, do you want this?"

"I want it," said the girl.

The sheriff pointed at Morgan. "Then tell me, who is that man over there?"

The little girl's eyes turned to Dan Morgan. Morgan held his breath. "That's Da'y," said the girl.

Over near the door one of the men laughed. "Well, that ought to settle it, Sheriff," he said. "If he's her daddy, it's a cinch he ain't Morgan."

The sheriff flushed. He got up, wiped a hand over his mouth, holstered his gun. Dan Morgan's body was cold with perspiration. He choked back a sudden impulse to laugh. He remembered how he had tried to perfect the girl's pronounciation of the name Danny. Luckily he had not succeeded.

The sheriff came forward. "I'm sorry, Kruse," he said, "but you do look a hell of a lot like this man Morgan an' we want him bad."

Morgan shrugged. He made no answer.

The sheriff glanced toward the bed. "If there's anything we can do—"

"There's nothing," Morgan answered. "There's nothing anyone can do."

The sheriff crossed over to the door and went outside and the other members of the posse followed him. Morgan turned to the bed. He stared down at the silent figure of Mrs. Kruse. There was a faint smile frozen on her lips, almost an approving smile, it seemed to Morgan.

From outside came the sound of the posse mounting and riding away. Morgan lifted his shoulders. He said under his breath, "I've done it again. I've escaped again. But it was close, this time. Terribly close. And another time I might not be so lucky."

Martha came up to where he was stand-

ing, stared at her mother's face. She suddenly began to cry and Dan Morgan picked her up and carried her outside. The girl's arms fastened themselves tightly around his neck and her tears wet his cheek. Morgan patted her clumsily on the shoulder. "You mustn't cry, Martha," he whispered. "We're going to get along all right, you and me."

He stopped abruptly, said again, "You and me," and tried to figure out all that those words might imply. He really should find a family that would be willing to take the girl. But even as he realized that, he knew that he wouldn't. Some place, surely, he told himself, he could find a home where the name Dan Morgan wasn't known and there he could start his life all over. At least, he could try.

The girl lifted her head. "I'm hungry," she told him.

Dan Morgan laughed. He said, "Martha, keep those arms of yours tight around my neck for a while. I've got a notion that that's going to be awfully important to me for a long time." •

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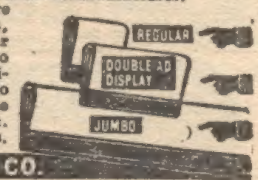

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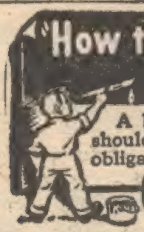

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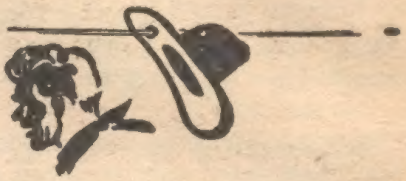
BEFORE THEY BECAME BAD



MANY of the Western badmen were not bad to begin with, but circumstances beyond their immediate control—either economic or psychological—drove them into the paths of lawlessness. While we do not condone them for what they did, still we must admit they were the product of their time and environment.

The decade immediately following the Civil War was one of unemployment, unrest and political chicanery. Returning from gory battlefields to disrupted homes, many ex-soldiers drifted away to virgin lands beyond the Mississippi and Missouri, seeking solutions to their problems. There they found life to their liking—full of risk and adventure.

Life was held cheaply on the raw frontier, and there was a marked absence of law and order. Thus, it was easy enough for a lonely man to drift into bad company. No wonder, then, that the more unstable and reckless among them turned to the easy pickings which the life of banditry offered. No matter what the risk, the huge dividends from a stage or train robbery, from a gambling or rustling project loomed large indeed in the eyes of a cowboy earning a mere $30 a month and found.

Even though death at the end of a rope or from lead poisoning loomed straight ahead, it was a life preferable to that of being a poorly paid printer, school teacher or army scout. Also, there were those among the law enforcers who took advantage of their official positions to engage secretly in nefarious games on the side.

Below is a list of fifteen badmen and gunfighters of the Old West, giving their professions before they became famous—or infamous.

1. Doc Holliday, dentist.
2. John Wesley Hardin, schoolteacher.
3. Billy the Kid, bootblack.
4. Henry Plummer, Sheriff, Bannack, Ida.
5. Ben Thompson, printer.
6. Joseph A. Slade, station manager, Overland Stage Co.
7. Al Jennings, lawyer.
8. Tom Horn, stock detective.
9. Wild Bill Hickok, soldier.
10. Joaquin Murrieta, prospector.
11. Bass Outlaw, Texas Ranger.
12. Burt Alvord, Deputy Sheriff, Tombstone.
13. Clay Allison, rancher.
14. Sam Bass, cowboy.
15. Buckskin Frank Leslie, Indian Scout, U.S. Army.

—*Norman Renard*

WHETHER YOU ARE 15 OR 75 . . . READ THIS IMPORTANT MESSAGE

New Sickness and Accident Benefits Include $25 Weekly Payment Feature

Costs Only $12 a Year — Down Payment $2.50
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The older you are, the harder it is to get protection against financial worries that come when accident or sickness strikes. That's why the reliable North American Accident Insurance Company of Chicago has issued a special policy for men and women up to 75 years of age. It helps meet sudden doctor and hospital bills — and the cost is only $12 a year for both men and women from 15 to 59 years old . . . only $18 a year from 60 to 69 years . . . from ages 70 to 75 only $24 a year. Easy payment plan if desired.

No doctor's examination required, merely your own statement as to your present health. If your policy is in effect at age 75, you may even continue it to age 80 at no further increase in premium. ABSOLUTELY NO REDUCTION IN BENEFITS REGARDLESS OF AGE. Protects you 24 hours a day.

This is the popular, sound "SERIES 500" Limited Accident and Sickness Policy which thousands of men and women are carrying, all over the country — it pays $25 a week for 10 weeks for total disability resulting from certain specified accidents and sicknesses; AN ADDITIONAL $25 A WEEK for 4 weeks for accidents requiring hospital confinement; up to $25 cash for doctor bills (at the rate of $3 per visit) even for a minor accident such as a cut finger. In case of accidental death the policy pays $1,000.00 cash to your beneficiary. Accident benefits effective from date of policy. Sickness benefits effective 30 days from date of policy.

In addition, the policy covers many sicknesses including pneumonia, cancer, diabetes, tuberculosis, polio, ulcer of stomach or intestines, and operation for removal of appendix, hemorrhoids, gall bladder, kidney and prostate, paying the weekly benefit after the first seven days of confinement to either home or hospital.

This new policy also has a double indemnity feature covering travel accidents. You receive $50 a week if disabled by an accident in a bus, taxicab, train, subway or street car, and $75 a week if the accident requires hospital confinement. The death benefit increases to $2,000.00 if caused by a travel accident.

Your benefits are never reduced even though you are also insured in a Group Plan, Blue Cross or other Hospitalization Insurance. So if you are now a member of some worthy hospitalization plan, you still need this additional protection. Only a small percentage of people are confined to a hospital, and even then only for a fraction of the time they are disabled. Most people — over 80% — are confined at home where hospitalization plans do not apply. Or, they are hospitalized for a few days or a week, then spend weeks of convalescence at home before they can go back to work again. The North American Policy pays specified benefits regardless of whether you are confined to your home or to a hospital.

North American Accident Insurance Company of Chicago has been in business for more than sixty-five years, and is one of the largest sickness and accident companies with assets of over $19,000,000.00. It has paid out many millions to grateful policyholders when they needed help most. North American is licensed by the Insurance Departments of all 48 States and the District of Columbia.

Whatever your age, whether you are young or old, you need this sensible, necessary protection. Get full details about this new policy by sending for the revealing booklet, "Cash or Sympathy." The booklet is absolutely free. It will be mailed without charge or obligation of any kind. We suggest you get your free copy by mailing the coupon to Premier Policy Division, North American Accident Insurance Co. of Chicago, 830 Broad Street, Dept. 769, Newark 2, New Jersey.

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